

Performance and Social Meaning in the Lied: Schubert's *Erster Verlust**

By Lawrence Kramer

Conventional wisdom has it that the German Lied, which Schubert brought to maturity as a form, expresses in music the affective meaning of its text. Whereas earlier vocal music concentrates on expressing emotions in themselves, the Lied expresses the conjunction of emotions with moods and sentiments: that is, with general states of feeling in which particular emotions occur, and with thoughts prompted by moods or emotions. Most of the literature on the Lied grounds this expressive relationship in the character of the music as fixed by the score. I use the term "fixed" advisedly. The assumption is that what is expressive about the Lied, as opposed to what may be expressive about its performances, coincides with the elements of composition—melody, harmony, and rhythm—that may not be varied. Carl Dahlhaus even suggests that in order to give the Lied "pretensions to the status of a work of art," Schubert had to surmount a performance-centered aesthetic, the aesthetic of strophic song, in which the singer rather than the composer produces the expressive differences between strophes.¹ In what follows, I would like to question this assumption of unqualified compositional priority. The musical elements that vary with performance, both those the score indicates and those it does not, may not lie outside the expressivity of the Lied after all. On the contrary: they may be decisive in both shaping that expressivity and placing it in historical perspective. Given the still potent precept that emotion in music can be named but not defined or grounded, the availability of historical perspective is especially important.

This position on performance is meant to be strong but not radical. There is no question here of devaluing the compositional fixities of the

* This paper was originally presented at the Aston Magna Academy at Rutgers University in June 1993. The presentation was accompanied by multiple performances of *Erster Verlust* (by Thomas Gregg, tenor, Maureen Balke, soprano, and Michael Zenge, piano) which realized the interpretive possibilities that the paper envisions.

¹ Carl Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, trans. J. Bradford Robinson (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), 98–99. Dahlhaus suggests that Schubert collapsed "the initial sharp distinction between through-composed and strophic songs" by combining the two.

Lied, only one of enlarging and complicating their field of action. Nonetheless, pursuing the question will require us to problematize our understanding of both the Lied in particular and musical expressivity in general. What exactly do we mean when we say that a Lied expresses affective meaning? Where and when does this expression arise during a listener's encounter with the Lied? To what conceptual or social order does affective meaning belong? How does this conceptual or social provenance affect the expressive process? And is the concept of "expression" really adequate for what a Lied does when we are *not* simply concerned with emotion—or even when we are?

The short answers to these questions will encapsulate my argument. A Lied expresses affective meaning either by juxtaposing more or less congruent forms of textual and musical expression, by extrapolating from an analogy between textual imagery and musical procedure, or both. The expression arises when the music provokes the listener to acts of interpretation, something that may just as well occur after as during the sensuous experience of listening. It is in this connection that the question of performance arises. Affective meaning belongs to the sociocultural order that fashions historically specific types of subjectivity, that normalizes identities and defines common sense—but does so most often in ways that leave its activity misrecognized, if recognized at all. The relationship between the music and this sociocultural order constitutes the expressive process. Or it would do so if the process were expressive, which—strictly speaking—it is not.

My topic in this article is the role of performance in the related processes by which the music of a Lied (1) provokes interpretation and (2) projects socioculturally conditioned patterns of subjectivity. For present purposes, the question of expression can be dealt with briskly. Although some Lieder are satisfied with a loose, conventional congruity between their texts and their music, many others concretize the text-music relationship by musically imitating a single textual detail or applying "tone-painting" to a few key words. The connection between the textual and musical parts seems to trigger a connection between the text and the music as wholes. In Romantic aesthetics, such a dynamic part-whole relationship is the nucleus of the symbol—the immediate, sensuous form in which intimations of transcendental value appear. In Goethe's words, the symbol is "a living and momentary revelation of the impenetrable"; in Coleridge's, "while it enunciates the whole, [the symbol] abides itself as a living part in that Unity, of which it is the representative."² Even the simplest Lied,

² Goethe's remark is from his *Maximen und Reflexionen*, Coleridge's from a notebook entry; both are quoted by Thomas McFarland, *Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin: Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the Modalities of Fragmentation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 30–31.

therefore, can share in the “living unity” of the Romantic symbol, without itself being anything so portentous.

The text-music relationship, however, cannot be limited to a replication, an “expression,” of poetic content by musical content, at the level of either the parts or the wholes. Because a Lied is always a reaction to a text, replication is only one among its available modes. A Lied can extend, narrow, (mis)appropriate, subvert, debase, exalt, eroticize, lyricize, dramatize, fragment, unify, analyze, sublimate, or sublimate the text, and so on. With Lieder that set texts of serious literary consequence, these processes, as I have argued in detail elsewhere, typically serve as means of deconstruction, in the sense that the Lied seeks to differ systematically from the text that it also seeks in part to resemble. The Lied constitutes its “expressivity”—its vividness, emotional force, and meaningfulness—precisely by declining to be a simple (or even a complex) “expression.”³ Thus, just as even the simplest Lied can borrow the glamor of the Romantic symbol, the simplest Lied can also borrow the excitement of the symbol’s undoing. Lieder are slight things, but they arise in the auratic haze of great ones. Perhaps that is why a moving performance of a Lied so often seems to turn a slight thing into a great one.

Performance, at any rate, is now to be the object of some philosophizing. To begin by dusting off an old philosophical distinction, the fixed features of the musical artwork occupy the plane of substance, the variable features that of accident. It is customary to analyze and evaluate a composition on the basis of its fixed features alone; the variable features are allowed to determine only whether an individual performance is boring, mediocre, exciting, transfiguring, revelatory, parodistic, eccentric, “authentic,” and so on.

The authority of notated fixities is an institutional fact about Western art music. The historical trend since the Enlightenment has been for this authority to rise steadily, in tandem with the cult of original genius and the concomitant deployment of aesthetic appreciation as both a model

³ Lawrence Kramer, *Music and Poetry: The Nineteenth Century and After* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 125–70. Put more strongly: the song seeks to differ from the text by continually deferring a full resemblance to it. See also Kofi Agawu, “Theory and Practice in the Analysis of the Nineteenth-Century Lied,” *Music Analysis* 11 (1992): 3–36. Although their interests and arguments diverge in several respects, both studies conceptualize the association of text and music as a dynamic process rather than a static relationship: “[T]he appropriation of the text by the music is not a *fait accompli* that is given to the listener with the sound of the first note. It must be enacted, must be evolved, during the course of the music itself” (Kramer, *Music and Poetry*, 127). “[What] has failed to be taken seriously by analysts [is] the elucidation of the specific technical means by which [the] transformation [of text into music] comes about” (Agawu, “Theory and Practice,” 30).

and vehicle of social accommodation. Improvisation and ornamentation disappear; fidelity to the score becomes the performer's motto, justifying both adherence to traditional procedures and departures from them; notation itself grows ever more complex, exact, and exacting. Justifiably or not, Western art music since the mid-nineteenth century has trained people to act as if musical compositions had an ideal existence.⁴ The classical masterwork has been implicitly defined as a score imparting transcendental value to any performance in which the variable elements adequately articulate the fixed ones. Hence the custom, among both musicians and reviewers, of highlighting the role of performance precisely where classical scores are thought to be aesthetically weak. Masterworks need executors; problem pieces need advocates.

This whole account, however, is skewed by a latent bias towards instrumental music, or at least toward a certain conception of instrumental music as autonomous art. Vocal music does not fit the mold so well. The practices of transposing for different voices and providing alternatives for extreme high or low notes make the distinction between fixed and variable elements hard to maintain. (Unlike arrangements of instrumental works, transposed songs are not considered second-best approximations.) The personal character of individual voices is not easy to disentangle from the expressivity built into the music they sing. And, most importantly, vocal music is always implicitly dramatic. Whether in the Lied or opera, the singer's musical interpretation always subtends a dramatic interpretation that can vary widely from performance to performance. Both the voice and the accompaniment contribute to this process, as the accompaniment shapes itself to the requirements of the voice's interpretive dramaturgy. This kind of variability is a constitutive feature of all song—substantial, not accidental—and as such it puts into question the very possibility of an authoritative, ideal form independent of performance.

An effective way to theorize the interpretive dramaturgy of song is to trace its typical evolution. The results will naturally vary with different types of song, as defined by such factors as the presence or absence of a fixed, fully-composed accompaniment, the degree of independent interest imputed to the text, and the degree of authority granted to the poet's and

⁴ Thus Carl Dahlhaus writes that the musical artwork is intended to be "an ideal object with an immutable and unshifting 'real' meaning." The aim of notation is to specify this object, the aim of performance to realize it. See Carl Dahlhaus, *Foundations of Music History*, trans. J. Bradford Robinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 150, 155. Various avant-garde composers in the second half of the twentieth century have, of course, diverged from the ideal of notated fixity, but its hold on the musical mainstream is if anything stronger than ever.

composer's intentions. The following model assumes the invariable presence of the accompaniment, moderate to high textual interest, and the expectation of dialogue or interplay between the poet's, composer's, and performer's intentions, which may nonetheless differ substantially. In other words, the model outlines the interpretive dramaturgy of the modern art song, of which the Lied is a prime example.⁵

A poetic text taken alone is open to a wide range of possible interpretations, the limits of which can never be drawn with certainty. To set the text to music is to narrow the range; the compositional scheme enhances some possibilities and excludes others. Different settings of the same text make different choices in this regard. To perform the composed setting is to narrow the range still further. By positioning itself in relation to the text, to the compositional scheme, and to other possible performances, a specific performance selects some possibilities—sometimes only one—and declines others. We might say that the compositional scheme engages dynamically with the text to set up a first phase of interpretive dramaturgy, and that the performance engages dynamically with the compositional design to set up a second phase. The two phases of dramaturgy, moreover, may be in full agreement, partial agreement, or outright disagreement. What we call "the song" is usually a preferred imaginary trajectory running from text to performance.⁶

It follows that in performing a modern art song we are privileging one such trajectory. But it is important not to have an unrealistic idea about what that privileging accomplishes. Neither the first nor the second phase of interpretive dramaturgy is likely to produce a coincidence between

⁵ Other interpretive dramaturgies, of course, raise compelling questions that require separate study. How, for example, is musical meaning affected by utilizing (not "setting") texts of low interest or independence, especially (but not exclusively) in popular song? What are the interpretive dynamics of arrangement, both in popular and in art music (think of Schubert's *Erlkönig* in a nineteenth-century arrangement for soloists and orchestra)? What happens when a well-known song is transcribed (varied, ornamented, improvised on) instrumentally?

⁶ For a different model of song interpretation based on the availability of a range of meanings, see David Lewin, "Auf dem Flusse: Image and Background in a Schubert Song," in Walter Frisch, ed., *Schubert: Critical and Analytical Studies* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 126–52. Lewin offers the useful suggestion that the (fixed, notated) music of a song stands to its text as an actor does to a script; the music comments on the text by selecting one among a variety of "plausible" realizations. The implied principles of singularity and plausibility, however, may both be questioned. An actor's realization of a script need not be univocal (even when it tries to be); the category of plausibility can be (and often is, though not by Lewin) used to rule out challenging interpretations. It is important to recognize that a text may specify only a small part, and authorize even a smaller part, of the range of meanings available for it. Meaning is not the basis of interpretation but its outcome.

hearing the song and intuiting a full, richly contextualized meaning. For most of us, I imagine, such coincidences are rarities. The song as we are likely to hear it, caught up in a keen but necessarily wavering attention, is likely to produce no more than a general impression, intelligible but indefinite. The character of the song's interpretive dramaturgy can be grasped only by reflection. In other words, the interpretive dramaturgy must itself be interpreted.

The needed reflection requires knowledge of the text; it can begin before, during, or after we listen; and it may combine numerous acts of anticipation, listening, and recollection into a complex sum that no single performance can realize. Our engagement with a song, therefore, is not wholly determined by our listening to it and can never become fully present in any single act of listening to it. In some cases listening may even inhibit our grasp of the song. Both songs and performances, moreover, differ widely in the degree to which they acknowledge or dissemble the non-presence in their midst. These claims can be broadened to cover the arts in general, but they are particularly telling when applied to music, the immediacy of which has traditionally been supposed to have special epiphanic powers. A poetics of performance is possible only when performance itself is not its only venue.

With this recognition in mind, we can return to the issue of interpretive dramaturgy. It will prove useful to invoke another part-whole distinction at this point. Both composition and performance can offer interpretive provocations on two levels, one general, the other particular. General provocations arise from among the continuously present or consistently recurring features of a composition or performance. Particular provocations arise from unique or infrequently recurring musical events. Both the features and the events vary too widely to be tabulated. Interpretive provocations in song evolve from concrete combinations of music and text; they can be offered by whatever accosts or perplexes the ear, whether at the instruction of the score or the decision of the performer.

The two levels of interpretive provocation may or may not be in agreement everywhere—or anywhere—in a given song or performance, and they may or may not be strictly separate. To the extent that they are separable, however, they advance separate interests even where they agree. The general level usually fulfils the traditional mandate of the Lied to express affective meanings. The results are customarily treated as universals, on the attractive but question-begging principle that feelings have no history. Critical reflection, however, may unsettle that principle by finding, or simply noticing, the historical conditions in which certain kinds of feeling and expression become possible or important. Provocations by particulars offer the opportunity to project these conditions of feeling

concretely, opening the song up to historicizing interpretations alert to the sociocultural construction of subjectivity. Hermeneutically marked particulars are the sites at which the contingencies of history sound through the universalizing claims of sensibility. The result is not to abolish the impression of affective universals, on which the Lied, like most art-music genres, depends, but to shift focus from the feelings signified to the process of signification.

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For a case study of interpretive dramaturgy in the Lied, I turn to one of Schubert's Goethe Lieder, *Erster Verlust* (First Loss), D. 226, composed in 1815. The choice of this one song over so many others is necessarily somewhat arbitrary. The issues the song raises, however, go to the heart of Schubert's social milieu in unexpected ways, and the song itself, being simple as well as artful, focuses those issues with welcome clarity. In another respect, too, this song can claim an exemplary standing. Its text is one of Goethe's most frequently set poems, attracting Zelter, Mendelssohn, Wolf, and even Verdi as well as Schubert among the many who put it to music.⁷

Schubert's tempo indication for *Erster Verlust* fixes an unequivocal mood: "Sehr langsam; wehmütig" (very slowly; sorrowful). How does this mood position the song in relation to the text? In order to answer, we need to work with a reading of the text that the text itself can be said to sanction—with the proviso that this reading represents not the truth of the text, but a heuristic fiction by which we can imagine an interpretive dramaturgy for the song.

In this case, the title has implications that can be pondered even before the text is read. Despite its unpretentiousness, the phrase "first loss" is equivocal. On the one hand, it denotes a moment of pathos; on the other, it connotes a certain distance from that pathos. Being first, the loss is special; but being, inevitably, only the first of many, it is not as special as it seems. To speak of first loss presupposes a worldly-wise later perspective grounded in common experience. Someone who suffers first loss embarks on a path—perhaps a course of development or maturation, perhaps just a course of destiny—that many others have also learned to follow. First loss is both an end and a beginning.

⁷ Willi Schuh lists thirty-four settings in his *Goethe-Vertonungen: Ein Verzeichnis* (Zurich: Artemis Verlag, 1952).

This duality seems to soften the pangs of loss a little, or so the language of Goethe's poem suggests:

Ach, wer bringt die schönen Tage,
Jene Tage der ersten Liebe,
Ach, wer bringt nur eine Stunde
Jener holden Zeit zurück! (1-4)

[Ah, who can bring back the beautiful days, those days of first love,
ah, who can bring back only an hour of that sweet time?]

The terms designating what is lost are colloquial, almost commonplace: the beautiful days, that sweet time, those days of first love. There is no extravagance of Romantic passion here; there is not even an image or metaphor to mark the speaker's love as unique and irreparable rather than generic. The only urgency comes, almost subliminally, from the rhythmic effect of verbal repetitions and parallels. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that the speaker must actually work to sustain the keenness of his loss:

Einsam nähr ich meine Wunde,
Und mit stets erneuter Klage
traur' ich ums verlorne Glück. (5-7)

[Alone I nourish my wound, and with ever-renewed lament mourn
over lost happiness.]

To nourish the wound requires attentive care, a negative version of the care required for healing. In a usage resembling Goethe's, and cited together with it in the Grimms' *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, Schiller is explicit on this point, writing of those "who nourish the wound they ought to heal."⁸

Both Schiller and Goethe play rhetorically against an older usage in which, in the context of a wound, *nähren* did mean to heal, and in Goethe's text the nourishing of the wound actually has a healing outcome. In taking the form of poetry, the ever-renewed lament that keeps the wound open acquires a new value; it yields aesthetic pleasure. Having described the process of lamentation, the speaker closes by acting it out:

Ach, wer bringt die Schönen Tage,
Jene holde Zeit zurück! (8-9)

[Ah, who can bring back the beautiful days, that sweet time?]

⁸ Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, s.v. "nähren," *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, vol. 7 (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1889), col. 305. Schiller's original reads "(die) die Wunde nährten, die sie heilen sollten."

These lines, an abbreviated repetition of the opening statement, constitute both a renewal of lament within the poem and a formal means of achieving poetic closure. The pleasures of form thus mitigate the pains of content. The same mitigation also affects the poem as a whole, which is itself a member of the speaker's ever-renewed sequence of laments. (The repetition within the poem mirrors the repetition that is the poem.) But the language of lament, as mentioned earlier, is not anguished here; it is temperate, even abstract. Transformed into poetry, the renewal of lament objectifies and sublimates the loss that prompts it.

Schubert's *wehmütig* setting reverses this process. His song replaces Goethe's classical coupling of ethos and pathos with an unconditional Romantic pathos.⁹ Whereas the text is at bottom a reflection on the healing power of art which takes itself as an illustration, the song is a demonstration that some wounds never heal. Compositionally, Schubert makes his point at the general level by combining the heavy-hearted tempo with a series of stabbing accents and dissonant inflections, with recurrent sob-fractions in the vocal line, and with a texture marked by abrupt shifts in dynamics against a *pianissimo* baseline. (See example 1, which gives the song in full.) The dynamics also contribute to a pervasive sense of emotional strangulation. The loudest sustained level is *mezzo forte*, the only *forte* attacks being damped down promptly to *piano*. The emotions figured here are depressive; the stuff of what Coleridge, also lamenting something like first love, called dejection, they can find "no natural Outlet, no Relief / In word, or sigh, or tear."¹⁰

Among the song's compositional particulars, two are especially suggestive. The first is the vocal line for the words "traur' ich ums verlorne Glück" (I mourn over lost happiness): a descending phrase ending on a long low C at "Glück" (m. 16). The C marks the voice's registral low point, and it invests "Glück" with a special throaty darkness, partly because the phrase approaches this nadir by skip (f^1-c^1), and partly because elsewhere in the song the voice's lowpoint is considerably higher (usually ab^1, g^1 in m. 14 for "Klage"). The speaker's depressive self-alienation thus bears him to a lonely place apart. The harmony for this passage tells the same story: with "Glück" the voice goes to the dominant and prepares (in a pregnant

⁹ On Romantic pathos regarded as an inversion of Romantic irony, see my *Music and Poetry*, 160–61. The pleasure-tinged embrace of melancholy is characteristic of the culture of feeling in Biedermeier Vienna, a point emphasized by Jane K. Brown in her lectures on Romanticism at the 1993 Aston Magna Academy.

¹⁰ "Letter to Sara Hutchinson," ll. 19–20. In its better-known version, published as "Dejection: An Ode," this poem edits out (represses?) the origins of dejection in lost or unachieved love.

Example 1. Schubert, *Erster Verlust* (op. 5, 4), D 226.

Sehr langsam, wehmütig (M.M. ♩ = 54)

Ach, wer bringt die schö - nen Ta - ge, je - ne

4
Ta - ge der er - sten Lie - be, ach, wer bringt nur

7
ei - ne Stunde je - ner hol - den Zeit zu - rück! Ein - sam

11
nähr ich mei - ne Wunde, und mit stets er - neu - ter Kla - ge traur'

Example 1. (cont.)

15

ich ums ver-lor - ne Glück. Ach, wer bringt die schö - nen

19

Ta - ge, wer je - ne hol - de Zeit zu - rück!

pause) to renew its lament. The dominant belongs to a sectional half cadence; what follows is the reprise of the opening, with the voice, pointedly, still clinging to a plaintive C.

The second suggestive particular is the song's piano postlude, just one measure long. Overtly based on a transposition of the vocal phrase for "Zeit zurück" (mm. 9, 21), this postlude also loosely echoes the descent to "Glück" at pitch and answers its sectional half cadence with the final full cadence. The postlude reconfirms that lost happiness can and should have no remedy. *Erster Verlust* is in F Minor, but the vocal line ends with a would-be final cadence on the relative major, A \flat , while asking who can bring that sweet time back ("jene holde Zeit zurück"). The major close carries Goethe's healing implication: perhaps the singer can regain a portion of lost sweetness in the very song of sadness. But the cadence is unsteady—the A \flat chord pointedly lacks its fifth—and the implication wistful. The postlude follows immediately with the real final cadence, correcting the key to F Minor and revoking the possibility of healing through art. As echoed in the postlude, the wistful phrase for "Zeit zurück" not only grows rueful, but also merges into the still more somber echo of the descent to "Glück."

The performers of *Erster Verlust* can either seek to convey Schubert's dejected resistance to consolation or try to edge the song back in a more

accepting Goethian direction. A "Schubertian" reading might take a morose basic tempo, almost too slow for comfort, and indulge in retards at the most important phrase endings. This would not only dramatize the speaker's almost autoerotic nourishing of his wound, but also yield accents on the key words "Liebe" (love), "Wunde" (wound), and, twice, "zurück" (back). A telling exception to this pattern of ritards could be made at "traur' ich ums verlorne Glück," where the vocal descent could be accelerated, only to be countered by a new ritard on the voice's low C at "Glück" and the associated dominant progression on the piano. This local provocation would confirm the general one with a climactic emphasis on what has been lost. The confirmation might be enhanced by giving "traur'" (mourn), which is positioned as an upbeat, a syncopated vocal accent. Meanwhile, the dynamics in this "Schubertian" performance would admit sharp *forte* attacks with prompt damping, but be careful to keep the *mezzo forte* passage, which includes the descent to "Glück," at its designated, deliberately unsatisfying level.

A "Goethian" performance of *Erster Verlust* would be far simpler. It would choose a dignified, not a morose, basic tempo and avoid tempo fluctuations. It would interpret the *forte* attacks with restraint but let the *mezzo forte* passage find some cathartic relief with a small dynamic wedge peaking at "traur'" and sinking swiftly to "Glück." Two measures of rolled right-hand chords, which lead up to "traur'," could be allowed some of the heaviness a "Schubertian" reading would have to deny them. Finally, where a "Schubertian" reading would emphasize the piano postlude with a big retard and a long final hold, a "Goethian" reading would treat the postlude as unceremoniously as possible, as a formal gesture of closure rather than as an interdiction of healing.¹¹

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But which of these performances to prefer? One way to decide is to ask what is at stake in them beyond unexamined matters of taste. And that question leads back to the text, or rather to the unstated cultural horizon against which the text must be read.

A first but not an only love implies a second. And contrary to another old song, love is not necessarily more wonderful the second time around. In mourning the departure of his first love, which belongs to the "sweet

¹¹ Schubert himself hesitated between these alternatives even after the first edition of *Erster Verlust* was in press. His original postlude lacked the melodic echo which became, in revision, its most important feature. See Franz Schubert, *Neue Ausgabe sämtliche Werke*, vol. 1a, *Lieder*, ed. Walther Dürr (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1970), xxii.

time" of youth, Goethe's lyric speaker defers the arrival of a second love belonging to the more exigent time of manhood—and implicitly to marriage. By his own account, Schubert did the same thing after failing to marry his own first love, Therese Grob, in 1815 or 1816.¹² The credibility of this story has been questioned in light of Schubert's possible homosexuality;¹³ what seems unquestionable is the cultural authority of the (ready-made) first-love narrative that the story reproduces.

The idea that the joys of the first love are irrecoverable and that the second is necessarily a lesser thing has complex roots. By the early nineteenth century, the bourgeois husband and father had begun to outweigh his aristocratic counterpart as the value-defining model of Western masculinity. As Peter Gay has argued, however, bourgeois marriage was riven throughout the century by conflicts between love and practicality, passion and finance, personal autonomy and parental authority.¹⁴ And although these conflicts, as Gay argues, may have found successful resolutions more often than legend records, the taint of compromise, not to mention corruption and hypocrisy, nonetheless stuck fast. There was a widespread feeling that, as Friedrich Schlegel put it as early as 1798, "A so-called happy marriage is to love as a correct poem is to an improvised song."¹⁵ Just at the time when erotic love was being idealized as radically individualistic and free of worldly constraints, bourgeois marriage demanded the renunciation of that ideal. First love, real or imaginary, had to be set aside in order to consolidate one's masculine identity, even if the result was a possibly castrating wound.

Gay cites as typical the case of a Hamburg lawyer, Otto Beneke, who fell in love with Marietta Banks in 1841, found she loved him in return, and—as his diaries show in obsessive detail—did everything he could for the next four years to prevent the marriage both of them longed for. From the outset, Beneke perceived Marietta as usurping the place of an earlier love, and by 1844 the perception had worked its way into his dreams. He dreamt he married a bride who (he saw) was not Marietta but who looked like his dead sister. He dreamt Marietta came to him in his room; as he

¹² See the statement by Anselm Hüttenbrenner in Otto Erich Deutsch, ed., *Schubert: Memoirs by his Friends*, trans. Rosamond Ley and John Nowell (London: A. & C. Black, 1958), 70.

¹³ Maynard Solomon, "Franz Schubert and the Peacocks of Benevenuto Cellini," *Nineteenth Century Music* 12 (1989): 193–206.

¹⁴ Peter Gay, *The Bourgeois Experience, Victoria to Freud: Volume II, The Tender Passion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 96–134.

¹⁵ Friedrich Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), no. 268, p. 55; also cited by Gay, *Bourgeois Experience*, 58, in a different translation.

took her in his arms and kissed her he realized "it was another being in her form." Beneke himself interpreted this dream as an admonition or warning. He dreamt Marietta tore a white flower from his buttonhole and demanded he wear only colored flowers; he replaced the white flower with a dark red one, then awakened, saying, "It is the white flower which has grown so red in my heart's blood." He dreamt he became engaged to Marietta: "A vicious imp first insulted and later attacked him, leaving him with a painful wound. When Marietta seemed only too pleased to nurse him, a physician declared the wound beyond cure."¹⁶ This last dream is particularly suggestive in the context of the others. The wound is Beneke's punishment for his engagement to someone he may have loved best, but not first: it is the white flower turned red, the guilt of betraying first love by accepting its loss, which no later love, however devoted, can remedy. The imp is harder to interpret without further evidence, but a vicious homunculus may suggest a hostile phallus, alienated from Beneke, on whom it nourishes, by reinflicting, the wound of first loss.

From Goethe's speaker to Beneke to those most famous of victims, Tristan and Amfortas, the fantasy of receiving such a wound finds psychosexual backing in revived traces of the young man's original "first love," his childhood love for his mother. The Oedipal background in Beneke's case is sufficiently indicated by his religious annual observance of three special occasions: Marietta's birthday, his wedding anniversary (for he married her in the end), and the day of his mother's death. More broadly, as Friedrich Kittler has shown, the German-speaking world in the early nineteenth century made the educative value of mother-son love a major pedagogical and cultural issue, while never leaving its mandatory loss in doubt.¹⁷ And this is a love that is genuinely irrecoverable, because it follows the iron law of the Oedipus complex; it must be renounced in order for a boy to identify with his father and embark on the path to manhood. Bourgeois marriage in the nineteenth century demanded, among other things, a re-enactment of the Oedipal sacrifice—what Freud calls the shock by which the boy's first love is "literally smashed to pieces"¹⁸—at the heart of the bourgeois family. This smashup supposedly allows the boy to feel he has escaped castration, but as Jacques Lacan in particular has emphasized, the

¹⁶ Gay, *Bourgeois Experience*, 26–27, 29–30.

¹⁷ Friedrich Kittler, *Discourse Networks: 1800/1900*, trans. Michael Metteer, with Chris Cullens (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 3–173.

¹⁸ Sigmund Freud, "Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes" (1925), trans. James Strachey, in *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*, ed. Philip Rieff (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 192.

escape is itself a form of castration.¹⁹ Hence the imaginary wound, which Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, in his film version of *Parsifal* (1982), brilliantly made into an object separate from the body, carried around on a cushion.

Amid these affiliations, Schubert's setting of "Erster Verlust" takes on a whole new dimension. The speaker in Goethe's deceptively simple lyric is moved by an ambivalence he cannot acknowledge. Enmeshed in the equivocations of nurturing his wound, he simultaneously defers and prepares his surrender to the demands of fate or maturation. Insofar as he renews his laments, he refuses that surrender. But insofar as, in the very act of lamenting, he sublimates his loss through art, he has already moved on to resignation or maturity. His assimilation of the demands of desire to the instruments of culture turns his apparent resistance to Oedipal law into a refined form of compliance.

It is precisely this compliance that Schubert insists on refusing. The young man in his song will not buy masculine identity at the cost of renouncing his true desires; he would rather pay court to his wound.

The song makes this point compositionally by packing the seven measures devoted to the wound, which serve as a middle section, with musical signs of intense emotion, made all the more telling by their muffled expressivity. The voice passes through a chain of sobs at "nähr ich meine Wunde," the last of which the piano elongates at "Wunde" in a higher register; the voice enhances the abrupt dynamic change at "stets erneuter" (ever-renewed) with a florid melisma as the piano begins its passage of rolled right-hand chords; and the voice shapes each of its three phrases in this section as a dying fall while the piano sustains an agitated bass line slowly descending from the middle register until it sinks at last into the bass. The massing of these expressive signs suggests an effort, perhaps a failing one, to convey the full weight of the young man's sorrow. What they pointedly do not suggest is any effort at sublimation. If anything, a slowdown in harmonic rhythm during this section, culminating in a measure of diminished sevenths beginning with a sob on "Klage," suggests exactly the opposite. Here, as in the sobs on "nähr ich meine Wunde," the cultivation of the wound becomes as sensuous as it is painful. The young man could almost be recuperating his lost, ultimately maternal, love in the relationship between himself and his wound. In any case, his nourishing of the wound is reaffirmed when the piano postlude, in a "Schubertian" performance, exposes the aesthetic sublimation implied by the poem as a bogus ideal.

¹⁹ Jacques Lacan, "The Signification of the Phallus," in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977), 281-91.

The oppositional character of *Erster Verlust* can also be concretized in a further particular, which coincides with the one point at which Schubert altered Goethe's text:

- Goethe: Ach, wer bringt die schönen Tage,
 Jene holde Zeit zurück?
 [Ah, who can bring back the beautiful days, that sweet time?]
- Schubert: Ach, wer bringt die schönen Tage,
 Wer jene holde Zeit zurück!
 [Ah, who can bring back the beautiful days, who that sweet time!]

Schubert's interposition of an extra "wer" may seem slight enough, but its effect is considerable.²⁰ The original wording emphasizes the experience of former happiness and should probably be construed as asking the rhetorical question, "Who has the power to bring back lost time?" The new wording emphasizes personal agency, and can readily be construed as asking the nonrhetorical, if hopelessly wishful question, "What beloved can restore to me the happiness brought by my first!" In clinging to the *person* of the beloved, the song compounds its refusal to accept the psychosocial mandate of bourgeois masculinity. The young man cherishes not only his wound but also a fantasy of repetition, a return of the first love in the person of a second, that he knows, or says he knows, to be impossible.²¹

This fantasy should not be hard to intimate in performance. There are four occurrences of the word "wer" in the song. The first three belong to the original poem and are set off the beat to unaccented eighth notes. The fourth, unauthorized "wer" is set to a sensitive weak-beat quarter note—a note unaccented with respect to the downbeat that follows it, but accented in itself because it marks an uptick in dynamics. The singer in a

²⁰ There is an obvious formalist objection to placing undue interpretive weight on the extra "wer." The repetition, it might be said, is just a means of giving the voice an entry on the upbeat. The song, however, sounds just fine if the vocal upbeat is eliminated—and even if it didn't, there is no reason why a technical maneuver should not also be an interpretive crux. The problem with the objection is the network of exclusionary assumptions that underwrite the word *just*.

²¹ The impossibility of return is suggestively embedded in the "ach" that begins both the poem and—without prelude—the song. As Ingrid Rieger-Botszeit observed at the 1993 Aston Magna Academy, the "ach" stands in the place of the unspeakable. Recognizing this, we might say that as the initiator of a retrospective speech-act, the "ach" casts the whole song or poem as a substitution, approximation, or failed repetition.

“Schubertian” reading of the song might progressively accentuate each of these apparently low-profile notes, building up to a decisive accent on the final, extra “wer,” perhaps combined with a retard extending across the whole of m. 20. The accent would form an exact parallel to the earlier one recommended for “traur” and by that means help focus the young man’s mourning on a fantasmatic person rather than a remembered state of mind.

At this point one obvious performance element, so far ignored, may seem overdue for comment. By patriarchal convention, a speaker of unmarked gender in a poem signed by a man is presumed to be male. The presumption certainly makes sense for Goethe’s “Erster Verlust,” which, as I have tried to show, is deeply if tacitly bound up with the cultural construction of masculinity. But though Schubert’s setting responds in kind, the song can be sung just as well by a woman as by a man. If a woman does do the singing, at least two new dramaturgical possibilities follow. We can accept the woman’s voice as a surrogate for a man’s, either by adopting an attitude of gender indifference or by identifying the timbre of the female voice with that of a youthful male on the model of an operatic trousers role. Either way, the “Schubertian” and “Goethian” readings envisioned here would retain the force ascribed to them, perhaps with a somewhat keener sense of life-crisis if the female voice is taken as a youth’s. Alternatively, we can hear the song as the lament of a young woman, in which case the “Schubertian” and “Goethian” readings would reverse their original polarity. Where a young man’s clinging to lost love may be resistant to gender norms, a young woman’s can only be compliant; in the cultural milieu of Schubert and his contemporaries, women were understood to be childish and overemotional by nature, especially in matters of the heart. Or as Lord Byron put the principle in 1818, “Man’s love is of man’s life a thing apart, / ‘Tis a Woman’s whole existence.”²² A feminist appropriation of Schubert’s *Erster Verlust*, therefore, might well reject the passionate “Schubertian” reading as tinged by a misogyny that the more self-possessed “Goethian” reading would resist.

* * *

Despite ramifications like these, *Erster Verlust* is neither complex nor “important” music. Obviously a contribution to what Dahlhaus identifies as the *Biedermeier* culture of refined conviviality,²³ it invites amateur perfor-

²² *Don Juan* I.194, ll. 1–2, internal quotation marks omitted.

²³ Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth Century Music*, 168–78.

mance and lasts less than two minutes. Yet the interpretive dramaturgy of the song engages social issues that are complex indeed, and important both to Schubert the composer and Schubert the social being. Should the psychosocial contract behind the ascendant middle-class norm of masculine identity be accepted or rejected? A diary entry Schubert wrote about a year after *Erster Verlust* ponders the question in terms that have made it a crux in recent debates over his sexuality. "Take people as they are, not as they should be," reads one section. "It is a bad stage manager who gives his actors parts they are unable to play," reads another. And another, now notorious:

Happy is he who finds a true friend. Happier still he who finds a true friend in his wife.

To a free man matrimony is a terrifying thought in these days: he exchanges it either for melancholy or for crude sensuality.²⁴

It is possible, even likely, that Schubert's assimilation of ideal marriage to the model of male friendship indicates that his own true desires, whether or not he has recognized them clearly at this point, are directed towards other men. It is certain, however, that he believes ideal marriage to be rare at best. That may be what makes the thought of matrimony terrifying to him. For he finds that although present-day marriage is rarely happy, there is nothing outside of marriage but loneliness and celibacy on the one hand and the emptiness of sex without friendship on the other.²⁵ One way of refusing to accommodate oneself to this system of unhappy alternatives would be to cling, on principle, to imaginary bliss, even if only through the wound made by its absence. First love is only one way to represent such bliss, but it is both a revealing and a compelling one. The step that Schubert takes in *Erster Verlust* eventually leads to *Winterreise*.

Schubert's songs, and his instrumental pieces, too, return often to the dilemmas of psychosocial compliance and resistance. When they do, the effect of performance is crucial. When the slow movements of the late A-

²⁴ Otto Erich Deutsch, *Schubert: A Documentary Biography*, trans. Eric Blom (London: Dent, 1946, reprint, New York: Da Capo, 1977), 71. For the controversy over the diary entry, see Maynard Solomon, "Franz Schubert and the Peacocks of Cellini," *Nineteenth Century Music*, 194–97; Rita Steblin, "The Peacock's Tale: Schubert's Sexuality Reconsidered," *Nineteenth Century Music* 17 (1993), 5–8; and Maynard Solomon, "Schubert: Some Consequences of Nostalgia," *ibid.*, 34–36.

²⁵ In a personal communication, Marshall Brown has suggested to me that Schubert's word *vertauschet*, generally translated as "exchanges [for]," serves in the diary entry as a loose synonym for *verwechselt*, "confuses [with]." If so, the gulf between real and ideal marriage is even more formidable; where exchange posits a marriage contrasted to bad alternatives, confusion posits a marriage *consisting* of bad alternatives.

Major Piano Sonata (D. 959) and the last String Quartet (G Major, D. 887) break up the flow of their lyricism with disruptive interludes, super-charged passages of a kind the “wound” section in *Erster Verlust* is not allowed to become, only the performers can determine how radical the disruptions are and whether the music can or should recuperate from them.²⁶ Or consider the important song *Ganymed*, the text of which uses erotic imagery to depict its youthful speaker’s ascent from the bosom of maternal nature to that of a supernatural father. The climax of the song is a series of increasingly elaborate melismas on the phrase “all-liebender Vater” (all-loving father). Performed with a convivial voice and in strict tempo, these can suggest a celebration of the Oedipal turn from mother to father that normatively structures masculine identity in the bourgeois era. Performed in operatic voice and with expressive ritards, the same melismas can suggest a subversive, transgressive displacement of homosexual desire onto the father’s name or image. Only the performers can make the determination.²⁷ Even in the ostensibly less drastic arena of *Erster Verlust*, social meaning can be realized only through a series of performance decisions that are more complex than the song itself.

Such decisions have always been made, of course, but tradition has left them to be made intuitively, as by-products of the normative musicianly concerns with feeling and form. Perhaps it is time to move from intuition to reflection: to develop, as performers and audiences alike, a keener, more explicit awareness of performance as interpretive provocation, and therefore of what is humanly at stake in the music we prize.

ABSTRACT

The Lied is customarily thought to express the affective meaning of a text by compositional means. Different performances of a Lied, however, may decisively affect its expressivity, provoking specific interpretations of the text-music relation and disclosing social meanings that may not be explicitly acknowledged by the text. It is possible to construct an interpretive dramaturgy running from the relation of text and composition through the relation of composition and performance. In Franz Schubert’s *Erster Verlust*, D. 226, the trajectory of one such dramaturgy uncovers the song’s implicit involvement with the perplexities haunting nineteenth-century bourgeois marriage.

²⁶ On disruptive interludes, with some comments on the A-Major Sonata, see my *Music as Cultural Practice: 1800–1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 93–97; see also Hugh MacDonald, “Schubert’s Volcanic Temper,” *The Musical Times* 119 (1978): 949–52.

²⁷ For an extended reading of *Ganymed*, see my “The Schubert Lied: Romantic Form and Romantic Consciousness” in Frisch, ed., *Schubert*, 224–33.