

*I would like to sing myself to death like a nightingale:*  
Robert Schumann's *Dichterliebe*

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The year 1840 was one of great importance to the life of Robert Schumann. It was a year that began with a serious injury to his hand, thus ending his hopes to become a concert pianist. It was the year Schumann was finally able to marry his longtime love, Clara Weick, and thus was also a year of great anticipation and joy for him. Yet the injury to his hand cannot be seen altogether as a curse either because it led him to the composition of one of the most important works of his career, the song cycle *Dichterliebe*. *Dichterliebe* is an example of Schumann's genius in the synthesis of literature and music. It is a narrative told in the course of sixteen songs with texts selected from Heinrich Heine's poetry. Contrary to the exciting events leading to Schumann's marriage, *Dichterliebe* describes in both the melody and words the decline of a relationship that was in the height of its love and the sorrow felt after such a love falls apart. It is a composition that is Romantic in both its words and the music that encompasses the words. Throughout this discussion, I will try to create an understanding of the song cycle *Dichterliebe* and how Schumann's creative life during this period gave rise to one of his greatest works.

To understand *Dichterliebe* as Robert Schumann understood his composition, we must attempt to recreate his creative environment. Schumann composed through the middle of the Romantic movement (which spanned roughly 1770-1900), a movement which was "the most important intellectual force affecting [him]" (Brown 11). Specifically, Schumann was greatly influenced by the writings of Johann Paul Richter (1763-1825) and Friedrich Thibaut (1774-1840), two prominent theorists in shaping romanticism. One is able to see from these authors' words their influence on Schumann's compositional aesthetic. For example, Richter believed that poetry and

music “are inextricably bound together,” an idea that Schumann seemed to take to heart in his composition of lieder (15). Furthermore, Thibaut once wrote “Music should represent all states of sensation, of emotion and of passion but [represented] poetically, and not, therefore, as they exist in a degenerated form” (18). This statement brings to mind Schumann’s piano accompaniments throughout *Dichterliebe* that seem to be extensions of Heinrich Heine’s poetry. It is apparent that these romantic thinkers influenced Schumann’s approach to song composition.

Included in Schumann’s creative environment is, naturally, his personal life. Schumann was 30 years old when he wrote *Dichterliebe* and was in the last stages in fighting for permission to marry 20-year-old Clara Wieck. Clara Wieck was already a well known touring virtuoso pianist who was also the daughter of one of Schumann’s early teachers. Her father, Friedrich Wieck, was completely against the relationship between Clara and Robert. He made claims that Robert was poor and a drunkard and would not give him permission to marry his daughter. On the same day that *Dichterliebe* was completed, Schumann submitted a “denunciation” to the court in Leipzig that charged Friedrich Wieck of defamation of character (Daverio 194). Wieck was found guilty, and soon after the court gave permission for Robert and Clara to marry without consent from her father. Throughout these court dramas, Robert and Clara remained some distance from each other, with Robert in Leipzig and Clara in Berlin. The author Peter Ostwald inferred from this separation of lovers that perhaps Schumann wrote best in solitude, away from Clara (159).

In 1840, Schumann was enjoying a burst of creative output despite the stresses of personal dramas going on at the time. At the beginning of the year, Schumann injured his

hand preventing from playing with the virtuosity he had before. Thus, his composition moved away from virtuoso keyboard music to instead a new focus on the song (Ostwald 158). He wrote to Clara “[I write songs] mostly while standing or walking around, not at the piano. This is an entirely different sort of music, which doesn’t have to be borne through the fingers – much more immediate and melodic” (158). Schumann found a new passion in writing songs, saying “what a joy it is to write for the voice [;]...it surges and storms inside me when I sit and work” (Schauffler 150). Schumann was writing song after song and began writing *Dichterliebe* immediately after completing his *Liederkreis* cycle, composed on the texts of Eichendorff (Daverio 193). The first eleven vocal sketches for the poems that were to make up *Dichterliebe* were written in two days, and the whole work was completed in just over a week (193). While composing the cycle, Schumann wrote to Clara, saying “I have composed so much that sometimes it seems to me altogether uncanny. Oh, I cannot help it, I would like to sing myself to death like a nightingale” (Schauffler 151). Schumann’s heart and soul were going full into the composition of *Dichterliebe*.

The poems that Schumann received so much joy from setting were from the collection *Lyrisches Intermezzo* by Heinrich Heine. Schumann at age 18, twelve years prior, first met Heine in Munich. Schumann found Heine as having “a bitter, ironic smile over the trifles of life...and it was precisely this deep inner resentment over life...that made [Heine’s] conversation so compelling” (Daverio 211). This ironic outlook on life can be observed throughout the texts of *Dichterliebe*, giving the texts a deeper twist from their seemingly tragic face value. Heine was born in Düsseldorf to Jewish parents and was probably thirteen years older than Schumann (“probably” because the exact date of

his birth is not known). Though he lived in Paris for much of his adult life, Heine was considered Germany's most famous poet after Goethe. "His poetry displays natural folk song quality...and is evidence of his rebellion against the overly refined and intricate poetry of the time" (Fischer-Dieskau 47). This is apparent in the regular rhythms and simple language in the poems that compose *Dichterliebe*. Also found in his poetry is a strong sense of drama, making his poems ideal candidates for use in a song cycle. Heine was "a poet who unflinchingly acknowledged the hopelessness of the human situation" and expressed such hopelessness "most clearly in his poetry" (47). Schumann was able to find an expression of his own despair in Heine's poetry and words to match the melodies of his emotions (46-47).

The first draft of *Dichterliebe* contained settings of 29 of Heine's poems from *Lyrisches Intermezzo*. Schumann soon whittled down that number to 20, hence the original title of *Dichterliebe: 20 Lieder und Gesänge*. In the four years between the time it was completed to the time it was published, *Dichterliebe* went through several transformations including changes in the vocal lines themselves and the final number of songs being narrowed down from 20 to 16. This cycle of sixteen songs was published a song cycle under the title of *Dichterliebe* and has remained a cohesive whole throughout the years despite the fact that the "missing" songs were indeed published after Schumann's death.

It is interesting that *Dichterliebe* was published as a song cycle and not simply a collection of songs, given that performing song cycles in their entirety was not in vogue during Schumann's time (Daverio 212). But *Dichterliebe* was the only Schumann song cycle to be originally published with the designation of "song cycle," so it must be that

Schumann felt strongly about this work as a cohesive whole. It most likely was somewhat of a risk to label *Dichterliebe* a song cycle because few people wanted to perform it as a whole, and thus the designation could possibly hurt the sales of the work (212). After all, Schumann did have to make a living. Yet, this was a sales risk taken by the man who once said, “For my whole life I’ve placed vocal composition *below* instrumental music, and have never considered it to be great art” (written a year before the composition of *Dichterliebe*) (204). Perhaps, since Schumann was newly taken with composing in song form, he felt he was making improvements on the genre as a whole and thought he could raise the status of song to “great art,” at least in his own opinion. Just before finishing *Dichterliebe*, Schumann wrote to Clara, “Sometimes it seems as though I were embarking on completely new paths in music” (213). So Schumann could have indeed felt that his song cycles were creating new directions in vocal music.

The form of a song cycle was in some ways a literary and musical synthesis, just as the opera was a synthesis of music and drama. The song cycle is similar in many ways to the modern day pop/rock “concept album” (for example, *The Wall* by Pink Floyd or *Christ - The Album* by the punk band Crass). They both are an assembly of song in a specific order to communicate some sort of narrative. Whereas the “concept album” usually has lyrics written by the composers of the music, Schumann’s song cycle choose to take poems from well-known authors such as Heine. But this does not take all the literary credit from Schumann. He was responsible for selecting, arranging, and the setting of all the poems so that they create a “coherent musical and literary whole” (Daverio 212). Thus one cannot analyze *Dichterliebe* simply as a collection of songs, but

one must also consider the factors of narrativity, tonal logic, and motivic recurrence, for these are the elements that can tie a song cycle together (212).

The opening song of *Dichterliebe*, *Im wunderschönen Monat Mai* (In the Beautiful Month of May), is lyrically a song of the joy of being in love. Heine matches this joy with the images of spring's beginnings:

In the wonderfully beautiful month of May  
When all the buds are bursting open  
There, from my own heart,  
Bursts forth my own love.

Yet, Schumann's piano introduction to the song fluctuates in tonality from A major to F# minor, a somewhat vague beginning to a song whose lyrical tone seems rather joyful. These piano introductions are common to Schumann's songs and serve the purpose to "set the emotional state for the upcoming text" (Fischer-Dieskau 82). This emotional ambivalence is continued in the piano throughout the song, although the resolving of the vocal melody on a cadence and the use of melodic sequences do serve to add a sense of hope and joy to the song. In similar fashion to the ambivalent prelude, the piano postlude (which is also a common aspect of Schumann's songs) ends on an unresolved dominant-seventh chord built on a C# (82). Perhaps this is done to add a sense of continuity to the song cycle; the listener is left waiting for what's next. This "open" ending could also be a foreshadowing of unrequited love that is to come in the narrative.

The following song *Aus meinen Tränen* (From My Tears) continues Heine's lyrical themes of spring and love in a similar fashion to its predecessor. Yet, "From My Tears" seems to have a more consistent tone of sadness despite the lyrics of hope and love. "From My Tears" transitions right into *Die Rose, die Lilie* (The Rose, The Lily), a much faster and musically joyous song than the listener has heard as of yet in the cycle.

Although images of nature are continued throughout the cycle, the images of spring are replaced by a near-obsessive representation of the narrator's love. As opposed to the many lyrical and musical contrasts through *Dichterliebe*, "The Rose, The Lily" has a quick pace and excited melody that seems to adequately match Heine's lyrical impression that the beloved is *all* the narrator is thinking about.

The following *Wenn ich in deine Auge* (Whenever I Look in Your Eyes) continues the cycle towards a sense of despair in the narrator. Heine's lyrics end the two stanzas "Yet when you say, "I love you"/ I must cry so bitterly." The following piano postlude to these lines (which comprises the final third of the song) is the most musically interesting aspect of the song. With its subtle crescendos and brief pauses, the postlude contributes to a sense of resignation in the song. This is a perfect example of Eric Sams' statement, "When Heine is silent, Schumann speaks" (Walker 139). Schumann's postlude continues Heine's thought without the use of words and is perhaps a musical expression of the narrator weeping for his love. It is as if these six measures of postlude reveal the true sorrow hidden Heine's words. *Ich will meine Seele tauchen* (I Want to Delve My Soul) which comes next also has an important piano postlude. Through the song, Heine's lyrics make reference to "A song belonging to my beloved," and after the singer's melody has ended, the listener hears in the piano what might have been this unsung melody (Fischer-Dieskau 83). This is then followed by "the true epilogue" of the song (83).

The musical tone of the song cycle becomes much more resolute in *Im Rhein, im heiligen Strome* (On the Rhine, the Sacred Stream) rather as opposed to the uneasy despair of earlier songs. In his poem, Heine's narrator compares his love's face to an

image of the Virgin Mary in a cathedral along the Rhine. The piano accompaniment mimics the flow of the Rhine with a two-note descending motive used throughout the song. The bass line recalls the cathedral by being both organ-like and firm like the structure of the building (Fischer-Dieskau 83). Yet despite the piano's description of the surrounding scene, the vocal line still manages to capture the wonder of the image the narrator has seen, especially in Schumann's choice to repeat the words "the lips" to give an effect of stammering (83). The resolute tone is carried over to *Ich grolle nicht* (I Bear No Grudge), almost so that the singer is being mock serious. This, in fact, could be the effect Schumann was going for, given the irony present in Heine's poem. Although the singer states, "I bear no grudge," the singer later mentions seeing "the snake that bites your heart," and it is apparent that whatever the lover has done, it has not been forgotten. Schumann milks this irony for all it's worth by repeating the phrase "I bear no grudge" four more times than Heine had in his original poem.

In *Und wüssten's die Blumen* (If Only the Flowers Knew), any hope that was masking sorrow has vanished as the singer makes the accusation "[you have] torn my heart in two." The vocal line is light somewhat detached until this accusation is made when it becomes bitter and heavy (Fischer-Dieskau 84). The song ends with a short postlude in the piano that expresses the narrator's emotions have indeed turned to anger. The emotion becomes bitter in *Das ist ein Flöten und Geigen* (I Hear the Flutes and Fiddles) as the narrator watches a wedding party and his love dancing with another. Schumann describes this music of flutes and fiddles with the right hand piano melody of continuous sixteenth notes. Although, Fischer-Dieskau claims that waltz in the piano is

not wedding party much but instead “its effect on the soul of the tortured listener” (84).

Either way, the waltz of the song is definitely a reference to the Heine’s words.

The unheard song of the narrator’s lover returns once again in *Hör ich das Liedchen klingen* (When I Hear the Song), this time as a painful memory. The piano uses a sparse figure repeatedly throughout, allowing room for the pain of the narrator to come through. In the postlude, this pain turns into tears as the repeated figure stops and in its place begins a downward sixteenth note run (Fischer-Dieskau 85).

As Fischer-Dieskau states, *Ein Jüngling liebt’ ein Mädchen* (The Youth Who Loves a Maiden) “demonstrates Schumann’s ability to do justice to Heine’s sarcastic tone” (85). Heine’s lyrics are an “old story” of ‘he did this and she did that’ which of course leaves the narrator with a broken heart. Schumann’s music reveals the irony with an obviously over-simplified ballad tune. A purposely-cheesy song stuck among the others of some deep emotional value. Even the final phrase, “it will break his heart in two,” is sung as if the narrator is happy about it. Finally, the piano ends the song with a “hackneyed closing using repeated chords” (85).

The following *Am leuchtenden Sommermorgen* (On a Brilliant Summer Morning) breaks from the irony of “The Youth Who Loves a Maiden” and turns to a quiet, wandering tone for the narrator. The piano once again uses a repeated downward figure, this time to mimicking the narrator wandering around the garden. The song is not bitter as before, but instead seems to be the narrator’s attempt at overcoming grief (Fischer-Dieskau 85). This grief, however, is not overcome, as one can tell in *Ich hab’ im Traum geweinet* (I Wept in my Dream). The narrator is still dreaming of his lost love. For the first two verses of Heine’s words, Schumann chooses to let the vocal part sing alone with

uneventful, brief piano chunks between phrases. Yet on the third verse where the narrator dreams his beloved still loved him, the vocal line is sung over long block chords in contrast. The effect gives an added importance to the words of the final verse. The narrator awakens from the dream in the song *Allnächtlich im Traume* (Every Night in My Dreams) and sounds as if the dream may have brought some resolve to his anguish. For the most part the piano follows the vocal line and mirrors the segmented quality. Again, the third verse is of interest in that it is sung in nearly a whisper emphasizing the narrator's wonder at the dream from which he has awoken.

The narrator then travels from the dream world to "the imaginary realm of the fairy tale" in *Aus alten Märchen* (From Old Legends). Schumann's music matches the ethereal quality of the words. The vocal line bounces along as the narrator wishes he could be in a "magical land." It is a brief daydream that takes the narrator away from his sorrow. The final song of *Dichterliebe*, *Die alten, bösen Lieder* (The Old, Evil Songs) brings him back into reality with the sounding of a long B minor chord (Fischer-Dieskau 86). In it, the narrator wants to place these old, angry songs (perhaps the songs of this cycle) into a coffin and sink it in the ocean. The song is sung with the mock seriousness that recalls *Ich grolle nicht* that brings out the sarcasm of Heine's text. The long epilogue of the song (and, indeed, cycle) "summarizes and at the same time defines the essence of the cycle" (Fischer-Dieskau 86). It is a return to the material of the postlude of *Am leuchtenden Sommermorgen* from earlier in the cycle. The epilogue is quiet and an almost bittersweet reflection of all that has occurred in the course of the song cycle. It is the perfect way to end the tale of love and sorrow.

Schumann's *Dichterliebe* fits perfectly among other works of the Romantic movement. It unifies literature and music with a narrative of intense emotional highs and lows. Heine's poems, with their frequent images of nature, also fit well into the Romantic archetype. It is the marriage of Schumann's melodies and Heine's words that make it stand out among song cycles, for somehow, they are able to complete one another. *Dichterliebe* succeeds as a song cycle and as a collection of songs, for there is no song that is not able to stand on its own. It is truly a great work of the Romantic period and one of the best examples of *lieder* to have ever been composed.

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