Representations of Image and Idea in the Songs of Franz Schubert

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Representations of Image and Idea in the Songs of Franz Schubert

The conference on Word & Image for which this essay was first prepared invited participants to discuss the relationships among the arts, most obviously the literary and the visual arts. Coming from the field of music, I turned this question towards song. By combining music and text, notes and words, songs necessarily inhabit a world of mixed media. When a song is persuasive, beautiful, or moving, it invites us to investigate how this process can work. What are the various ways by which such different sorts of things may be combined into a satisfying whole? I decided to approach this issue through a composer particularly associated with song, one who has been credited with having single-handedly transformed the genre of the German-language song (Lied), giving it new depth and subtlety and raising it to the level of great art. That composer is Franz Schubert.

As the standard view of Schubert's contributions to song—which one can learn by taking a music appreciation course or by reading the liner notes that come with recordings—is a good place to start, I will begin with a summary of that view.

Schubert (1797-1828) wrote over 600 songs in his short life. In this oeuvre, he shaped the genre, which had been a very simple one designed for accessibility to all and for home use, into a complex and sophisticated art form. Even in some of his earliest songs, he was exploring a musical expressivity far beyond that of contemporary songs. Thus, while he did have some musical models, Schubert deserves the credit for making song into a significant genre.

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(1) His piano parts were more interesting than those of his predecessors, and he became an equal partner of the vocalist.

(2) His songs had much more complex harmonies than had previously been considered appropriate for the Lied genre.

(3) His musical structure was more complex; along with strophic, which means that the music is repeated after each stanza, Schubert also used through-composed songs, where the music repeats in a regular fashion, often with different sets of words, and the music of the earlier stanzas is repeated in the later stanzas.

(4) His phrases were not necessarily designed to match poetic rhythm, and he often varied them for musical effect.

(5) He used a wide variety of musical styles, ranging from the traditional songs of the 19th century to discursive poetic scenes.

He did this by transgressing previously considered artistic norms and by inventing new ways of working with music and text.
The Image for which I prepared invited partnerships among literary and the visual arts and music. I turned to combining music and visual texts necessarily involved. When a song is sung, it invites us to work. What are different sorts of satisfying whole? He did this by transgressing many boundaries previously considered appropriate for song. Here is a list of a few of the most significant changes he made.

1. His piano parts were much more demanding than those of his predecessors; the pianist became an equal partner to the singer.
2. His songs had much more interesting and complex harmonies than their predecessors.
3. His musical structures became more complex; along with strophic songs—that is, songs in which the music is repeated over and over with different sets of words, as in a hymn—he wrote many through-composed songs whose music did not repeat in a regular fashion, but followed the details of the texts.
4. His phrases were more variable in length in order to match poetic rhythm and nuance.
5. He used a wide variety of texts for his songs, ranging from the traditional lyric poetry and ballads to discursive poems and even dramatic scenes.

The development of these new techniques, and their integration into songs that are expressive and complex works of music and poetry, are the foundation of Schubert's position as a recognized master of the art of song.

Before we explore some particular examples to consider how Schubert did this so persuasively, some of the problems with the standard view must be pointed out. Along with what is summarized above, it also includes some other ideas, more or less as follows. Schubert was a natural composer who produced music effortlessly and without really thinking about it. Although he often chose trivial and uninteresting
Lisa Feurzeig

poetry, his musical gifts enabled him to rise above the inherent emptiness of his texts, creating gorgeous songs that take the listener into a world of eternal, carefree youth.¹

This picture oversimplifies and trivializes Schubert's accomplishments, not to mention the fact that he faced serious and real problems in his life.² It turns him into an idiot savant—one of those bizarre people psychologists find every once in a while who can multiply ten-digit numbers in their heads but have none of the most basic practical or social skills we expect from normal people—while it diminishes the meaning of his compositions, giving us permission as listeners to enjoy the surface without even trying to understand what lies beneath.

In fact, the standard view denies that there is much to think about; it classifies Schubert as a composer of beautiful, beguiling surfaces without depths beneath them. (This connects ironically well to my discussion of water paintings below.) For that reason, the proponents of the standard view tend to emphasize Schubert's abilities as an illustrator of visual or aural images in poetry. My purpose here is to argue against this idea; I think that Schubert's central concerns as a songwriter were not about illustration, but about some very different things, and that his undeniable gifts as an illustrator were applied to these other ends.

The first three songs I will consider all describe scenes taking place on the water. By examining these songs, we will discover that even when Schubert appears to be illustrating the physical scenes described, he is also doing something more: using musical language to move deeper into the implications of the poems he sets. My final example in this essay concerns a song in which Schubert does something very different from illustrating an image; instead, he invents a musical equivalent for the poem's central idea. While in some ways his musical solution to the puzzle is still pictorial, the picture has moved to a higher level; it now illustrates an abstract thought rather than a particular sight or sound.

Water Images

Scenes involving moving water seem to have attracted Schubert; his songs are particularly famous for their portrayals of water. Like Schubert, many painters have been intrigued by the challenge of representing water in the nineteenth century. John Constable (1775-1837), known for his landscapes, made water a main theme. Figure 2.

As these three paintings demonstrate because it can be beautifully abstract and deadly. Then, of course, water's properties, it has a range of extreme conditions: very calm, painting still water, qualities of reflection, tides and details of the surface, swatches of cloud, painting stormy water, the enormouse waves and one thing that they is to show water in the ocean implies the world.
representing water. Two English artists of the nineteenth century offer some beautiful examples. John Constable (1776-1837) was particularly known for landscape painting, and J. M. W. Turner (1775-1851) made water, still or stormy, one of his main themes. Figures 1-3 present some characteristic and notably different examples of how water can be beautifully approximated on canvas.

As these three paintings show, water is fascinating because it can take so many forms. The same substance can be still or wild, tranquil or deadly. Then, of course, because of its reflective properties, it has a marvelous relation to light. Painters often present water in one of its two extreme conditions: very calm or very stormy. When painting still water, they can play with its properties of reflection, showing how it duplicates details of the surrounding landscape or huge swatches of cloud, sunset, and sky. When painting stormy water, they can stress the violence of enormous waves and tempest-tossed ships. But one thing that they cannot do, literally speaking, is to show water in motion. A painting of a stormy ocean implies the water's motion by showing an unstable scene—the viewer knows, from years of life experience, that the foamy wave must crash down in the next moment after the painting ends—but it cannot show a sequence of events. There is no way, in a single painting, to show that after one wave ends, another will follow, and another, and another. This, I believe, is the reason that it is much more difficult to find paintings of gently moving water, of rippling or swelling, than of water at the two extremes. Paintings can capture characteristic moments. Music, on the other hand, exists in time by its very nature. This helps to explain Schubert's interest in water poetry; he was able to represent the ways that water moves.

The first three songs discussed here demonstrate several things: how Schubert portrays the motion of water that he por-

Figure 3. J. M. W. Turner, Shipwreck.
trays many different kinds of motion that the musical scores sometimes create visual images similar to those in the poems and, finally, that in each song the depiction of water, however beautiful or powerful it may be, ultimately serves the greater purpose of conveying the poetry’s central ideas.

In the opening of the first song, “Auf dem Wasser zu singen” (see Example 1), the contour of the right hand part seems to be drawing a picture of waves—but what kind of waves? Each musical bar begins with a large upward leap followed by a slow descent in which every note is played twice. While the distances between the lowest and highest note are rather large, the effect of that amplitude is muted through the dynamics (pp means “very quiet”) and through the slow downward motion. So the effect is not that of a violent storm at sea, but of gentle swells on a smaller body of water, the kind of waves that pleasantly rock boats without causing any alarm or discomfort. Both in its appearance on the page and in the way it sounds, Schubert’s piano part represents just that sort of wave.

In the poem, the moving water is more than a pretty scenic backdrop; it turns out to be quite central. The poet compares a gently rocking boat with a soul drifting on waves of joy that are inspired by the beauty of sunset. The second stanza (not included here) then describes the light of sunset, continuing to emphasize images of evanescence and change. These two descriptive stanzas set up the poem’s main point: since time passes and everything is constantly in flux, the poet both welcomes and prepares for his own eventual disappearance from this earth.

In the poem, then, the softly moving water of the opening stanza carries symbolic and spiritual meaning, and Schubert’s music affirms this idea. The musical fabric conveys a feeling of constant motion that is reassuring and lovely, not fearsome or threatening. The music helps us to imagine the feeling of being a soul that is buoyed up and embraced by the abstract waves of joy, just as the boat is carried by the waves of water. The poet, entranced by the beauty of the natural scene, is happy to be part of nature’s flux, even to the point of accepting the necessity of his own death. The composer, taking the challenge, created a musical representation of that transitory beauty that is sufficiently seductive to make us understand the poet’s choice.

The next example, “Eifersucht und Stolz” from the song cycle Die schöne Müllerin, presents water in a much more violent form. A song cycle is a connected set of songs that tell a story, usually from the perspective of a single character. In this one, the main character is a young man who takes a job at a mill and soon falls in love with the miller’s daughter. Through all the joys and sorrows of his love, the stream that originally led him to this mill is his trusted friend. Throughout the cycle, the piano often represents the
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Example 1
stream, and the miller interprets its bubbling, rippling, or rushing figures as commentary on his personal situation.

In the opening of this song (see Example 2), Schubert composes the motion of water very differently than in "Auf dem Wasser zu singen." The music is louder (mf means "medium loud") and the notes significantly lower-pitched than in the previous song. Once again, the right hand seems to draw a picture of waves, but these waves are repetitive; they don't seem to get anywhere until the melodic line suddenly descends deep into the left hand. It then rises into the right hand again, where (as the singer enters) it moves regularly up and down, but in a very small melodic range. All in all, this turbulent opening suggests frustration or even obsession. The wave patterns seem to depict water whose path is blocked by rocks, so that it must constantly find its way around barriers. This image is similar to that in Figure 4, a painting of a mill by Schubert's Austrian contemporary Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller.

It is no surprise to notice that the title of the poem means "Jealousy and Pride." At this point in the story, the miller is coming to realize that he has a serious rival, a hunter who is quite attractive to the miller maid. Like any normal Romantic hero, he then assumes that nature, in the shape of the stream, feels just as he does. "Where are you going so quickly, so tangled and wild, my dear stream? are you chasing in fury after that
where (as the singer enters) up and down, but in a shape. All in all, this turbulence frustration or even patterns seem to depict washed by rocks, so that it must round barriers. This image Figure 4, a painting of a Austrian contemporary Müller. Notice that the title of the and Pride." At this point coming to realize that he hunter who is quite attractive any normal Romantic that nature, in the shape as he does. "Where are tangled and wild, my chasing in fury after that
Auf dem Wasser zu singen

(Friedrich Leopold Graf zu Stolberg)

Mitten im Schimmer der spiegelnden Wellen
Gleitet, wie Schwäne, der wankende Kahn;
Ach, auf der Freude sanft schimmernden Wellen
Gleitet die Seele dahin wie der Kahn;
Denn von dem Himmel herab auf die Wellen
Tanzet das Abendrot rund um den Kahn.

Ach, es entschwindet mit tauigem Flügel
Mir auf den wiegenden Wellen die Zeit.
Morgen entschwende mit schimmerndem Flügel
Wieder wie gestern und heute die Zeit.
Bis ich auf höheren, strahlendem Flügel
Selber entschwinde der wechselnden Zeit.

Die Sterne

(Friedrich Schlegel)

Du staunest, o Mensch, was heilig wir strahlen?
O folgest du nur den himmlischen Winken,
Vernähnest du besser, was freundlich wir blinken.
Wie wären verschwunden die irdischen Qualen!
Dann flösse die Liebe aus ewigen Schalen,
Es atmeten alle in reinen Azuren.
Das lichtblaue Meer umschwebte die Fluren.
Es funkelten Stern' auf den heimischen Talen.

Aus göttlicher Quelle sind alle genommen,
Ist jegliches Wesen nicht Eines im Chore?
Nun sind ja geöffnet die himmlischen Tore.
Was soll denn das bange Verzagen noch frommen?
O wäret ihr schon zur Tiefe gekommen,
So sähet das Haupt ihr von Sternen umflogen
Und spielend ums Herz die kindlichen Wogen.
Zu denen die Stürme des Lebens nicht kommen.
To Be Sung on the Water

Amid the shimmering, mirroring waves
Glides, like swans, the rocking boat;
Ah, on joy's gently shimmering waves
Glides the soul, like the boat;
For down from heaven onto the waves
Dances the sunset around the boat.

Ah, vanishing from me on dewy wings
On cradling waves, is time.
Tomorrow, may you vanish on shimmering wings,
Just as did yesterday's and today's time,
Until I, on higher radiant wings,
Myself shall vanish from changing time.

The Stars

You marvel, o Man, at how holy we shine?
O, if you would but follow the heavenly beckoning,
You would better understand our friendly twinkling,
How earthly cares would vanish!
Then love would flow from eternal vessels.
All would breathe in the pure azure,
The light-blue sea would surround the meadows.
Stars would sparkle in the valleys of home.

From a godly source are all derived,
Is every being not one in the chorus?
Now the heavenly gates are open.
What is the use of fearful hesitation?
O, if only you had already climbed to the depths.
You would see your head orbited by stars.
And playing about your heart, the childlike waves
To which the storms of life do not come.
Our last example of what is closely tied to painting its surroundings. "Des Fischers Liebesglück" tells of a young fisherman and his sweetheart, which takes place on a boat in the middle of a large lake.

The opening vocal melody is quite a crucial element in this piece. This melody subtly conveys the peacefulness of the place and the couple’s feelings, and even the movement of the water. We hear a repetitive rhythm and the melody hardly moves at all. In the way that the melody hardly moves at all in each phrase, moving notes that represent a height, normally, we hear and see the water in the way the phrases are symmetrically constructed, up and down to create a mirror image. The phrases are palindromes, like the sentence "Madam, I'm Adam."

This notion of reflection is symbolically significant in this piece and particularly good reason for the property mirrors us sent a certain introspective connection was particularly Romanticism, when thinking on ways of looking we use this idea "reflection" for the property mirrors us and the notion that a central a...
insolent hunter?" he asks.  Like his protagonist, Schubert projects the miller's anger and jealousy into the music of the stream.

It is important to point out that looking at musical scores as though they were pictures does not always work as well as it does here. That this is often true of Schubert in particular is probably one of the reasons he is so closely associated with the idea that music can represent words.

Our last example of water music is a song very closely tied to paintings of still water reflecting its surroundings. "Des Fischers Liebesglück" tells of a young fisherman's secret love tryst with his sweetheart, which takes place on a rocking boat in the middle of a lake at night.

The opening vocal melody (see Example 3) is quite a crucial element in Schubert's success here. This melody subtly conveys three qualities: the peacefulness of the place, the intensity of the couple's feelings, and even the reflective property of the water. We hear peacefulness in the rocking repetitive rhythm and the fact that at first, the melody hardly moves at all. We hear intensity in the way that the melody goes further and further in each phrase, moving to successively higher notes that represent a heightening of emotion. Finally, we hear and see the reflective property of the water in the way the first few brief phrases are symmetrically constructed, each moving up and down to create a mirror image of itself. These phrases are palindromes—that is, they are their own reflections, like the word "refer" or the sentence "Madam, I'm Adam."

This notion of reflection, as we shall see, is symbolically significant in this poem, so Schubert has a particularly good reason for building it into his music. In fact, as an aside, it is worth noticing that we use this idea "reflection" in two ways: not only for the property mirrors have, but also to represent a certain introspective kind of thought. This connection was particularly significant in early Romanticism, when many thinkers were working on ways of looking at the world based on the notion that a central aspect of human experience is that of encountering infinite self-referential spirals. We find such ideas in Hegel's philosophy and also in the fragments of Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis, and their literary friends. So it isn't surprising to find poetry from this time in which reflection plays a significant part.

This song differs formally from its poetic model, because Schubert has changed the poetic form to suit his musical needs. The first musical strophe includes three of Leitner's eleven poetic stanzas, as do the second and third. But then there are only two poetic stanzas left over, obliging Schubert to repeat the text of stanza 11 for the final section of his fourth musical strophe. While this may seem to indicate miscalculation on his part, or an unfortunate solution made necessary by Leitner's awkward eleven-stanza form, in fact Schubert uses this situation to the expressive advantage of the song. The vocal melody at the end of the musical strophe suits the words of the eleventh stanza so perfectly that it seems to have been designed with that text in mind. (See Example 4.)

As you can observe, the two largest leaps in the voice part occur here on the significant words lächeln (smile) and oben (above). This stanza describes the ecstasy the couple experiences at the high point of their tryst, which is so intense that it causes apparently conflicting emotions. They cry, they laugh,
and—inspired by the sight of the stars twinking below the boat—they imagine themselves to be already in heaven. The reflection of the sky in the water carries a symbolic meaning of heaven on earth. For the couple gently rocking in the boat, the bliss they find in this moment is a foretaste, or perhaps an actual experience, of the joys of heaven. (We have to remember that Victorian morals were a phenomenon of the late nineteenth century; Schubert's contemporaries were quite aware of the joy of sex.)

The arrival of the word “oben” on that octave leap is just too perfect to be a coincidence, and I am convinced that Schubert planned the whole song with this final occurrence of the octave in mind. We can think of the earlier strophes, then, as preludes that anticipate and set up the final stanza, suddenly transforming the melodic shape into something else. Listeners, participating back on our earlier strophes and reinterpreting them, find themselves in heaven. 

Like the other two verses described, “Des Fischers Liebesglück” is about the joy of sex. The motion, the motion of the things and thoughts of the couple; through musical motion and in the process, the Übermensch is formed, for Schubert, perhaps as a symbol of vice motion to use as much as to transform and to play out human experiences.

It is important to note that “Des Fischers Liebesglück” is more about the physical picture to present rather than either of the other verses—though it is an interesting property, for example, that the mirror icon mirrors itself while moving from points to points, does not represent a new motion. It operates in the same way that an element of the construct (the mirror icon) will not change in motion. By trying to think of “Liebesglück” as a song that tells a story, we start to understand that it operates beyond illustration.

**Song as Idea**

In the last song to be discussed, “Die Sterne,” the physical picture to present is of a sacred radiance and to present an idea. “Die Sterne” is a lyric inspired by the romantic critic Friedrich Schlegel's idea of speaking characters as mankind to overcome its wickedness and to create a brighter future. The sacred radiance and to reach the stars needed to create a bright future.
preparations that accustom us to the musical patterns of the song—which work not too badly for the other verses—but when we arrive at this final stanza, suddenly the real meaning of the melodic shape becomes clear to us. So we, too, as listeners, participate in an act of reflection, looking back on our earlier hearings of this melody and reinterpret them in the light of these last words.

Like the other two water songs we’ve examined, “Des Fischers Liebesglück” is a song about motion, the motion of the water and of the feelings and thoughts of the speaking characters. Through musical motion, all three songs do two things: they illustrate the poems they’re setting, and in the process, they move us, the listeners. Water, for Schubert, provided exactly the kinds of motion to use as musical backdrops against which to play out human emotions and experiences.

It is important to notice, though, that “Des Fischers Liebesglück” is more about abstract ideas, and less about the physical motion of the water, than either of the other songs. The palindromic property, for example, through which the melody mirrors itself while moving to higher and higher points, does not represent the water’s physical motion. It operates in the realms of intellectual construct (the mirror idea) and emotion (the intensity). By trying to read “Des Fischers Liebesglück” as a song that illustrates a poem, we start to understand that Schubert’s music goes beyond illustration.

Song as Idea
In the last song to be discussed, there is no real physical picture to present, only an abstract one. Here we can observe the subtle transition from song as a picture of a thing to song as an image of an idea. “Die Sterne” is a poem by the early Romantic critic Friedrich Schlegel in which the speaking characters are the stars. They exhort humankind to overcome its fearful wonder at their sacred radiance and to reach out to them. All that is needed to create a bridge between heaven and earth, they assert, is this simple act of will. They then describe the harmonious world that will result once this step has been taken, a world in which the qualities of heaven and earth are melded. Lines like “all would breathe in the pure azure” and “you would see your head orbited by stars” convey this idea of a mixed realm of heavenly and earthly things.

One astonishing line from the second stanza particularly carries this message: “O, if only you had already climbed to the depths.” This line seems contradictory because climbing is usually a verb implying upward motion to the heights, not the depths. By deliberately reversing the meaning of the verb, Schlegel is implicitly telling us that the upside-down world of reflection is the relevant one here. Just as the stars were under the boat in “Des Fischers Liebesglück,” here climbing can be done in the reverse direction. In other words, all the normal ideas about directionality have been neutralized; in this ideal unified world, up and down are no longer distinct.

I believe that Schubert extended the idea that Schlegel implies in this verse to create his own visual image of how Schlegel’s ideal world might be reached, and that he then invented an aural equivalent for this image. I’m suggesting, to put it bluntly, that he went beyond Schlegel’s words, developing in his own mind an idea at which Schlegel had only
Des Fischers Liebesglück
(Carl Gottfried Ritter von Leitner)

Dort winkt
Durch Weiden und blinket
Ein Schimmer
Blassstrahlig vom Zimmer
Der Holden mir zu.

Es gaukelt
Wie Irrlicht und schaukelt
Sich leise
Sein Abglanz im Kreise
Des schwankenden Sees.

Ich schaue
Mit Sehnen ins Blaue
Der Wellen
Und grüsse den hellen,
Gespiegelten Strahl.

Und springe
Zum Ruder und schwinge
Den Nachen
Dahin auf dem flachen
Kristallenen Weg.

Feinliebchen
Schleicht traulich vom Stübchen
Herunter
Und sputet sich munter
Zu mir in das Boot.

Gelinde
Dann treiben die Winde
Uns wieder
Seeinwärts vom Flieder
Des Ufers hindann.

Die blassen
Nachtembel umfassen
Mit Hüllen
Vor Spüthern den stillen,
Unschuldigen Scherz.

The Fisherman’s Luck
in Love

There beckons
Through meadows and twinkle
e A shimmer,
White-rayed from the room
Of the precious one to me.

It wavers
Like a will-o-the-wisp and rocks
Gently,
Its reflection in the circle
Of the swelling lake.

I look
Longingly into the blue
Of the waves
And greet the bright
Mirrored ray.

And I spring
To the oar and steer
The skiff,
Following the broad
Crystalline path.

My fine love
Sneaks faithfully from her little room
Down
And hurries merrily
To me in the boat.

Sweetly
Then the winds
Drive us again
Lakewards, away
From the lilacs on shore.

The pale
Night mists cast
A cloak,
Concealing from spies
The calm innocent game.

Und tauschen
Wir Küsse, so rauschen
Die Wellen,
Im Sinken und Schwellen
Den Horchern zum Trotz.

Nur Sterne
Belauschen uns ferne
Und baden
Tief unter den Pfaden
Des gleitenden Kahns.

So schweben
Wir selig, umgeben
Vom Dunkel,
Hoch überm Gefunkel
Der Sterne einher.

Und weinen
Und lächeln und meinen,
Enthoben
Der Erde, schon oben,
Schon drüben zu sein.
Franz Schubert and Song

Und tauschen
Wir küsse, so rauschen
Die Wellen,
Im Sinken und Schwellen
Den Horchern zum Trotz.

And as we exchange
Kisses, so rustle
The waves,
Sinking and swelling
To thwart listeners.

Nur Sterne
Belauschen uns ferne
Und baden
Tief unter den Pfaden
Des gleitenden Kahns.

Only stars
Watch from afar
And bathe
Deep below the path
Of the gliding boat.

So schweben
Wir selig, umgeben
Vom Dunkel,
Hoch übern Gefunkel
Der Sterne einher.

So we hover
Blissfully, surrounded
By darkness,
High above the glitter
Of the stars.

Und weinen
Und lachen und meinen,
Enthoben
Der Erde, schon oben,
Schon drüben zu sein.

And weep
And smile, and believe ourselves
Uplifted
From earth, already up there,
Already beyond.

hinted, in order to create an image for which a musical pattern would make sense. The word that best describes this image Schubert created is “exchange.” He envisions the ideal blended world as one in which humans and stars can easily move between heaven and earth, crossing the bridge they themselves have created.

We hear this exchange most clearly in the song’s middle section (see Example 5). The sense of peace arises partly from the key of this section, known as the subdominant, which is centered a fourth above the main key of the song. Subdominants almost always create a release of tension, which is most appropriate here, where Schubert is portraying the world without the usual separation between human and divine realms. This section is also harmonically static; it plays out a single chord, again representing the perfect peace and stillness of a harmonious universe. But within this stillness, there is a very significant kind of motion.

In music, the most obvious way to represent high and low, or heaven and earth, is through higher and lower notes. For that reason, heavenly images are often represented by soprano voices in Renaissance music. In the first section of this song, through some techniques too involved to explain here, Schubert sets up this equivalence, locating the human world in a lower range of pitches than the stars. In the B section that we’ll focus on, he then erases that distinction by demonstrating that exchange between high and low notes is easy and natural.
In measures 13 and 14, the voice ascends from E-flat to A-flat to C while the right hand of the piano descends through the same pitches, from C to A-flat to E-flat. The middle pitches are the same while the outer ones exchange, creating a kind of X shape. In the second phrase, measures 17 and 18, these two melodic figures themselves are exchanged, as the singer descends and the piano ascends. Yet a third type of exchange occurs in the intervening measures 15 and 16, where the piano part is a palindrome; finally, that palindrome is turned inside out in measures 19 and 20. In every possible dimension of the voice part and top line of piano part, Schubert presents to us the idea of a free exchange between worlds. The sense of ease and peacefulness grows out of the combined musical factors of the subdominant key, the static harmony, and this open and free exchange of chords and melodies.
In the other three songs we considered, it could be argued that he used illustration of particular images as a means to convey the ideas in the poetry. But Schlegel's poem “Die Sterne” did not present Schubert with definite pictures of that kind, so he had to derive them himself. If my view of his compositional process is correct, what Schubert did here (how consciously we do not know) was to extract and develop the poem’s central idea and then to imagine an appropriate visual representation of it—the exchange between high and low—that he could replicate in musical symbols. This procedure, while not entirely different from the standard view of Schubert as illustrator of the details of a text, is considerably more complex and sophisticated than anything the standard view acknowledges or deals with.

When criticism becomes a form of condescension, as in the standard Schubert picture, scholars have overstepped their roles as commentators and interpreters. The experience of seeking meaning in Schubert’s gorgeous tapestries of sound forces an interpreter to go deep into music and poetry. Even if the final result cannot be proved and documented, the process of learning poetry and song in this way creates a deep and respectful understanding of works of art.

Notes
1 A classic example of this view is Richard Capell’s book *Schubert’s Songs*, first published in 1928 and still widely read despite its serious flaws. Capell’s first chapter opens as follows: “The mere look of a composer’s pages is characteristic. The first glance at Schubert suggests a rippling movement, and by the side of the rippling a flowering. Or is it the opening of a window—the air is stirred. . . . There is no avoiding the thought of nature—nature at the springtime of the year—in connexion with Schubert. Never was another musician so young. All his songs, as for that matter everything he wrote, are the song of youth.” (3rd ed. London: Pan Books Ltd., 1957, p.3)

2 Schubert knew in 1823 that he had syphilis, a disease that was incurable in his time. In his mid-twenties, he was faced with the likelihood of gradual deterioration and death, and also with a huge constraint on intimate relationships. In these ways, this diagnosis was very much like that of AIDS in the
late twentieth century. That this situation troubled him is quite clear from his letters and from anecdotes about him, and is reflected in some of his most serious music, particularly the song cycle Winterreise (1826). When late Schubert is transparently beautiful, we need to hear this as transcendent, not naively carefree.

3 This song, as it happens, has been a victim of the type of commentary that characterizes the standard Schubert view. In a standard textbook used in courses on Romantic music, we read: "The poem is jingly doggerel, three stanzas worth, in absolutely regular dactylic tetrameter. . . . All this repetition, we might think, would be unendurable. But the song is a delightful thing, a clear success, and the repetitions seem of little consequence. For here, the text is submerged in music to the extent that the listener is scarcely aware of any poetic infelicities." (Leon Plantinga, Romantic Music: A History of Musical Style in Nineteenth-Century Europe (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1984, pp. 122-23.) This is an unfair response both to Stolberg's poem and to Schubert's treatment of it. As the final verse reveals, this is not just a happy nature poem, but a reflection on the evanescent nature of existence. At the end, the poet expresses his wish to be united with the cosmos. A critic may consider this a juvenile thought, or may think that the poet hasn't said it very well—but criticism needs to operate at the level of what the poem is actually saying, rather than dismissing it out of hand.

4 "Kraus," the word I'm translating as "tangled," is also the adjective used to describe curly hair. Schubert's piano part, as I've just pointed out, is notably indirect, which suggests to me that this particular word was a key one in his mind as he composed this song.

5 One of Schlegel's most famous, and longest, fragments, is his characterization of romantic poetry. He writes, in part: "And it can also—more than any other form—hover at the midpoint between the portrayed and the portrayer. . . . on the wings of poetic reflection, and can raise that reflection again and again to a higher power, can multiply it in an endless succession of mirrors. It is capable of the highest and most variegated refinement, not only from within outwards, but also from without inwards; capable in that it organizes—for everything that seeks a wholeness in its effects—the parts along similar lines, so that it opens up a perspective upon an infinitely increasing classicism." Friedrich Schlegel's Lucinde and the Fragments, trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), p. 175.