"I COULD SING MYSELF TO DEATH"

An Analysis of Schumann's *Dicterliebe, Op. 48, X: "Hör ich das Liedchen klingen"*

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Dichterliebe

X. Hör ich das Liedchen klingen

Text by Heinrich Heine (1797-1856)

With harmonic, formal, and motivic analysis

Robert Schumann (1810-56)
Op. 48, composed 1840

Langsam

Introduction

Voice

the "unsung melody"

Piano

p

g: i V♯ VI iv i 6/4 V i

5 ***Lines 1 & 2***

p

Voice

Hör ich das Lied - chen kling - en das einst die Lieb - ste sang. so

Pno.

i V♯ VI iv i 6/4 V♯ i i 6

9 ***Lines 3 & 4***

Voice

will mir die Brust zer - spring - en von wil - dem schmerz - en-

Pno.

iv V 6/4/3 i 6/4 ♭II 6 i V

c: i

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12

Lines 5 & 6

Voice

drang. Es treibt mich ein dunk - les Seh - nen hin auf zur Wal - des

Pno.

PT

i **B♭:** ii ♯ ♭6 4 2 V 6 5 I vi

16

Voice

höh, dort löst sich auf in Trä - nen mein ü - ber gro - sses

Lines 7 & 8

Hearing

Pno.

LN

vii° ♯ 4 2 V 6 5 V 7 VI i 6 4 V 7

Stretto/Elision

20 **g:** ii°

Epilogue (Re-enactment)

Voice

Weh.

Internalization

Pno.

i ii°6 i 6 4 V 7 ♯ VI ii°6 i 6 4 V♯

24

Traveling/Ascending

PT

Pno.

sf

Weeping Dissolution

sf

PP

i ♭II6 ii ♯ 6 5 i 6 4 V ♯ 4 3 / iv iv 6 i 6 4 vii° 7 / V

27

ritard.

Pno.

decresc.

V♯ 7 i

"I COULD SING MYSELF TO DEATH"

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HISTORY

The year 1840 was singular in the life and career of Robert Schumann. It was in particular a year of tumultuous up and downs in his relationship with fiancee Clara - as January dawned, Robert was embroiled in a courtroom battle with Clara's disapproving father, and at the close of December, the couple was lawfully wed. This personal drama made manifest itself in Schumann's music. Heretofore a composer of exclusively instrumental works, Schumann began in 1840 to compose *lieder* at a staggering pace – over 125 over the course of twelve months. This abrupt shift in focus, coupled with his prolific output, have led Schumann scholars to classify 1840 as the composer's *Liederjahr* – his "year of songs." Schumann himself was enthused about the change of course. Writing to Clara (who was on a performance tour abroad) on May 15, he said, "I have been composing so much that I wonder at myself. But I can not help it. I could sing myself to death, like a nightingale."

Less than a week later, with Clara still absent, Schumann began work on a new set of songs based on Heinrich Heine's (1797-1856) *Lyrisches Intermezzo*. Heine's work contains 65 poems, of which Schumann selected 20 to set to music. The poems are primarily short in duration – occasionally like epigrams - and deal with issues of love and loss. Schumann ordered his chosen verses to convey a dramatic arc: infatuation becomes love, which becomes loss, which leads to heartbreak, despair, and ultimately forgiveness and redemption. Robert completed the entire cycle in nine days. In 1844, the songs were published, minus an excised four settings, and entitled *Dichterliebe* ("Poet's Love") by the publisher.

The issues addressed in Heine's poetry had direct parallels in Robert's own life. At the time the pieces were composed, the suit brought by Clara's father against him had not yet been resolved, and the

future of the young couple was very much in doubt. Love and loss were on the composer's mind throughout 1840, and nowhere is this more apparent in Schumann's music than in his treatment of the texts that make up *Dichterliebe.* The sixteen surviving songs are poignant, personal, and real.

THE TEXT

The tenth (originally twelfth) song of Schumann's cycle depicts a narrator grappling with emotions aroused upon hearing a song sung by a past love.

Text	**English Translation**
Hör' ich das Liedchen klingen, das einst die Liebste sang, so will mir die Brust zerspringen von wildem Schmerzendrang.	I hear the little song sounding that my beloved once sang, and my heart wants to shatter from savage pain's pressure.
Es treibt mich ein dunkles Sehnen hinauf zur Waldeshöh', dort lös't sich auf in Tränen mein übergroßes Weh'.	I am driven by a dark longing up to the wooded heights, there is dissolved in tears my supremely great pain.

As can be seen, each of the two stanzas in the poem divides naturally into two parts, each consisting of two lines – eight lines of text in all. Grammatically, this distinction is made clear by Heine's use of punctuation after lines two, four, six and eight, but the reason for this division runs deeper than grammar: each pair of two lines conveys a single dramatic idea, as follows:

1-2 : Hearing	3-4: Internalization	5-6: Traveling/Ascending	7-8: Weeping/Dissolution

THE MUSIC: LARGE STRUCTURE

Hör' ich das Liedchen klingen is 30 measures in length, and is organized as follows:

					Stretto/Elision		
mm.	1-4	5-8	9-12	13-16	17-18	19-20	21-30
poem line nos.	introduction	1&2	3&4	5&6	7	8	epilogue
key area	g		→ c	→ B♭	→ g		

The piece begins with a piano introduction. The entrance of the voice in measure five constitutes a clear sectional divider. Schumann's use of cadences (authentic on the downbeat of m. 8 [g], authentic in m. 12 [c], half in m. 16 [B♭]) clearly indicate the next divisions. Thus, the four-measure phrase is firmly established as standard by the time one reaches measure the final two lines of the text. However, at this moment, an elision occurs – the piano introduction returns in the middle of the vocalist's final phrase, creating two measures of stretto effect (mm. 19-20). This unexpected entrance is rendered all the more jarring by the absolute regularity of the music preceding it.

The piece concludes with a lengthy epilogue for the piano alone – in fact, it seems disproportionately long for such a brief work. The epilogue is twelve measures in length (although the first two measures are part of the stretto effect discussed above), more than a third the length of the piece as a whole. A perfunctory glance reveals that, in addition to being lengthy, this epilogue contains material not found anywhere before in the piece. The nature and meaning of this outsized coda will be addressed in due course.

It is worthwhile to note that, aside from measures 19-20, Schumann faithfully follows the implied structure of the poetry, pairing each two lines together as a single phrase expressing a single

idea. This serves to reinforce the already apparent significance of the stretto section and the following piano epilogue.

THE MUSIC: SMALL STRUCTURE AND MATERIAL

mm. 1-8

The piano introduction presents a melody in the soprano register (beginning on the B♭ above the treble staff) which Schumann emphasizes by double-stemming, a two-voice accompaniment (stems down, treble staff), and a bass line. The melody at the top of the texture is syncopated and somewhat breathless, occurring always on the second sixteenth-note of each beat, and always preceded by a sixteenth-rest. The general contour of the melody is a descent. Harmonically, the music moves at a speed of one harmony per beat before pausing on the tonic for two beats in measure 8.

When the voice enters in measure 5, it performs an embellished version of the melody presented at the top of the piano texture in measures 1-4. The pitches and contour of the melody are preserved – however, the rhythm is altered to accommodate text, and the melody is transposed down one octave. Harmonically, these measures correspond closely to the first four bars of the piece (the only difference being the move to a first-inversion tonic harmony on the final beat of measure 8). These factors, coupled with the opening lines of Heine's poem ("I hear the little song sounding / that my beloved once sang") strongly imply that the narrator has heard (mm. 1-4) and repeated to himself (mm. 5-8) a melody. *This seemingly obvious interpretation in fact establishes an important registral distinction*: that music in the soprano range (above the treble staff) is to be considered *external*, or perceived, while music in a lower register is to be considered *internal*, or experienced.

mm. 9-12

In measures 9-12, the beginning of the vocal melody previously presented is imprecisely

inverted – rather than descending, it now ascends to a high point of D♭ (the singer's highest pitch) in measure 10. The harmony in this moment is also somewhat exceptional. Having modulated (via a iv/i pivot chord in the first half of m. 9) to the subdominant key of C-minor, Schumann moves to a neapolitan ($\flat II_6$) chord at this juncture, the piece's first real chromaticism. The effect is striking, particularly given the strength of the words ("shatter," "savage") of the poem. Surely, it is the composer's intention to create a lasting association between this distinctive harmony and these extreme emotions.

In the accompaniment part, the melody first heard in the introduction reappears here, transposed to the new key. Because of the register in which the tune is presented (see above), it is understood that this is a psychological manifestation as opposed to a true aural sensation. The implication is that the narrator is reliving what he/she has heard, and that the painful emotions expressed in the poem are being caused by this experience. This perception is reinforced by the vocal line's behavior in measures 11-12: whereas in the previous two measures it was inverted, it now returns to its original form and moves in parallel octaves with the unsung melody in the piano.

mm. 13-18

Measure 13 marks the point at which the text of the poem moves from its first stanza to its second, and Schumann correspondingly gives listeners a change of mode, modulating to the key of B♭ major. For the first time, a physical action is alluded to in the poem: the narrator is "driven up" to the "wooded heights." Although it would seem natural to accompany these words with a more "active" melody and accompaniment, the texture remains unchanged, and the contour of the vocal line descends counter intuitively in a fragmentary sequence. One might similarly imagine that music meant to depict traveling would become increasingly chromatic, but again, this is not the case – the harmonic rhythm actually *slows* here, with the accompaniment presenting just one chord per bar in measures 13-16. This

is therefore a puzzling moment for listeners. What seems to be the most dramatically active section of the text is afforded a rather mundane setting. However, there is a reason for this, which will be discussed later.

In measure 17, the music returns to the tonic key of G-Minor. The text alludes to a “dissolving in tears” of the narrator's grief. Schumann passes by yet another opportunity for text-painting, declining to integrate a descending motion into the vocal line or alter the accompanimental figuration in any way. Instead, the melody rises (in a gesture reminiscent of that in measures 9-10), then is interrupted by the piano epilogue in measure 19. The vocalist concludes his or her part of the piece by descending by step to a tonic G in measure 20, again moving in parallel octaves with the piano.

EPILOGUE (mm. 19-30): STRUCTURE AND MEANING

The piano epilogue begins, much like the introduction, with the unsung melody presented in the soprano register. Accompanying this, however, is an harmonically incongruous low C (m. 19), the lowest note yet heard, which draws the ear away from the final two measures of the vocal part. The melody is then presented in canon: one entrance occurs in measure 21, one in measure 23, and the last in measure 24. Each new entrance is specifically notated as a double-stemmed note on the pitch B♭, and each successive entry descends lower and lower in register.

In measure 24, the canon is ended. A sustained tonic note in the upper voice is accompanied by ascending lines in the three lower voices. The harmony becomes increasingly chromatic, and the pace of harmonic change intensifies – in measure 25, for the first time in the piece, listeners encounter a new harmony on every eighth-note. The neapolitan chord, not heard since its unique presentation in measure 10, reappears as a part of these gestures, in the second half of measure 24.

In measure 26, the epilogue reaches its apparent climax. The left hand of the piano presents a striking dissonance (a secondary dominant of V over a dominant pedal), while the right descends downward in a scalar figure. The descent continues, slowing and softening, in measures 28-29, before finally settling down for the final cadence in the last bar of the piece.

Musically speaking, the epilogue of *Hör' ich das Liedchen klingen* is completely inexplicable. It is unreasonably long, considering the length of the piece. It introduces material never before heard, and then withdraws this material without repetition. It is the most harmonically dense portion of the work, yet features no text. The piano epilogue simply does not make musical sense.

But it does make dramatic sense. When one revisits the text of the poem, one finds that the epilogue functions not just as a commentary on the text, but as a *re-enactment* of it. Consider the following:

LINES 1 & 2

Text (translation)	Dramatic Idea	Epilogue mm.
I hear the little song sounding that my beloved once sang,	Hearing	19-20

In measure 19, the unsung melody is heard in the soprano register for the first time since the beginning of the piece. As was discussed previously, this strongly implies a real aural event – that is, the narrator has been interrupted in his or her recitation by a second iteration of the melody.

LINES 3 & 4

Text (translation)	Dramatic Idea	Epilogue mm.
And my heart wants to shatter from savage pain's pressure.	Internalization	21-23

Each canonic entrance of the melody descends in register. It has already been established that an iteration of the melody in a register lower than the soprano range represents a psychological, rather than real, event. This being so, the constant, inexorable descent of the tune through the range of the piano clearly represents a movement from external to internal focus. The narrator's internalization of the melody continues until the lowest note of the piece (B♭ below the bass staff, m. 24) is reached. The permeation of the melody's meaning into the speaker's soul is complete.

At the end of this section of the epilogue (m. 24), the neapolitan chord is heard for the second and last time in the piece. The first time Schumann utilized this harmony (m. 10), he took great care to couple it with two other prominent textural features (the vocalist's highest note and the transposed sounding of the unsung melody), and thereby create an association with a “shattering” heart. His use of the neapolitan in the epilogue draws these connotations to the fore once again, and does so in the same location within the drama as in measure 10.

LINES 5 & 6

Text (translation)	Dramatic Idea	Epilogue mm.
I am driven by a dark longing up to the wooded heights,	Traveling/Ascending	24-25

As was discussed above, Schumann's setting of this inherently dramatic text in mm. 13-16 was surprisingly plain, with the composer seeming to neglect several opportunities to illustrate the poetry in music. Here in the wordless re-enactment, however, Schumann clearly and explicitly follows the actions described in the verse. The pace of harmonic pace quickens and becomes increasingly chromatic, giving listeners the sensation of mobility. Simultaneously, three out of the four voices ascend, and the dynamic level of the piece likewise rises. Clearly, a depiction of climbing is intended.

LINES 7 & 8

Text (translation)	Dramatic Idea	Epilogue mm.
there is dissolved in tears my supremely great pain.	Weeping/Dissolution	26-30

As was observed above, the treatment of the poem's final lines in the body of the song itself represented another "missed opportunity" for Schumann. Neither the accompaniment part nor the vocal line itself contain any descending figuration at this moment which could be interpreted as a musical manifestation of weeping. In the epilogue re-enactment, however, Schumann supplies this gesture. Over a wrenching dissonance in the bass (m. 26), a meandering line descends throughout the piano texture, growing slower and more faint as it goes. No more apt musical depiction of weeping and dissolution is imaginable – it is a fitting end to the narrator's silent story.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Of course, it is not enough to observe that the epilogue of *Hör' ich das Liedchen klingen* acts as a re-enactment of the text. One must also ask why Schumann chose to structure the piece in this way. Of course, this is a matter that invites subjective interpretation on the part of the analyst, and is therefore dangerous. However, there is one conclusion which seems fairly safe to draw. Heine's poem is a description of a single painful event. By essentially repeating the action described by the text after the conclusion of the poem itself, Schumann transforms this singular incident into an implicit constant cycle. Heine's narrator is afflicted by his or her memories once, while Schumann's exists in a state of continual torment which repeats with every new hearing of the unsung melody.

Whether Schumann's decision to treat the verse in this fashion was in some part autobiographical could be debated. It is true that in the Spring of 1840, Clara was often absent – she

would return home to Leipzig only briefly between engagements. This pattern of return and departure certainly could have seemed to Robert like the kind of miserable cycle depicted in *Hör' ich das Liedchen klingen*. While this is only conjecture, it is interesting to note that on March 20, 1840, Robert explicitly made reference to Clara's singing of his songs in a letter sent while she was abroad:

Robert Schumann to Clara Wieck, March 20, 1840

> ... A month to-day I shall be with you, God willing, dear child. Shall you not be happy to feel my arms about you again? Will you arrange a little private concert for your lover? I should like the big sonata in B flat (the whole of it), *then one of my own songs, played and sung by yourself (the words are the chief thing, remember)*, then your new scherzo, and, to wind up, Bach's C sharp minor fugue from the second book. It is not to be a charity concert! I am prepared to pay liberally. We shall settle our accounts at the end — you can guess in what coin. How I shall look forward to this lovers' recital! You dearest, best of creatures. I shall smother you with kisses when I see you. [Italics added]

Also intriguing is that the first three pitches of the unsung melody in *Hör' ich das Liedchen klingen* (B♭, A, G) are a transposition of the musical realization of "Chiara," one of Robert's nicknames for his betrothed. The non-transposed statement of this motive would be C, B, A (**C h** i **a** ra). However, transposition of the motive would be necessary in this song due to the overarching key scheme of *Dichterliebe* (sharp keys → flat keys → sharp keys). This is a tenuous leap, of course, and not definitive in the slightest. But as Schumann's earlier works (such as *Carnaval*, op. 9) attest, he was fond of such musical games, and the purposeful use of such a motive for autobiographical means is certainly not out of the question.

These uncertainties aside, what is clear is that Schumann's music in this song coaxes from Heine's brief text a great welling of emotion. The key to understanding the drama Schumann creates lies in the piano epilogue, which re-enacts the drama a second time, and by so doing creates a cyclical rather than singular mood. This interpretation may have had its basis in Schumann's life, and the musical materials he used to construct the unsung melody of the setting may have been based on the

nickname of his fiancee. Schumann, as always, acts as the master storyteller, inviting listeners with his music deep into an imagined world.