

Winterreise (Winter Journey) D. 911

Franz Schubert (1797–1828)

Four years had passed since the composition of the twenty songs of *Die Schöne Müllerin* on the poems of Wilhelm Müller. At the beginning of the year 1827, Schubert's mood was very sombre and new works were becoming scarce. *"The composer had become more serious. He had been gravely ill for a long time. He had endured some disastrous experiences and a sense of optimism was leaving his life. For him, the winter of his life had begun,"* (reminiscence of his friend Mayrhofer.) The composition of the songs of *Die Winterreise* lifted him out of his inaction without improving his mood. About this "cycle of dark songs", he confides to his friend Spaun: *"They have touched me more than any other songs."*

In fact, when faced with these new poems by Müller, Schubert rediscovered the feeling of intimacy that he had experienced writing the cycle *Die Schöne Müllerin*. In each of these song cycles, their story tellers speak of lost love and renunciation, always in tune with the nature that surrounds them and that resonates with their feelings. Each shows the parallel between the narrator's physical voyage and their psychic transformation. The atmosphere of *Winterreise* is truly tragic— more so than *Die Schöne Müllerin* where we are present for the birth of love, for the ardent pursuit, and where the unhappy miller finds a certain kind of consolation in the sound of the rushing water. In *Winterreise*, the relationship is over as the storyteller begins. To lighten this voyage, there are only memories of fleeting happiness, of an illusion (exemplified in song #19, *Täuschung*). Here, the music is coloured with irony, an *"irony rising out of despair"* (Mayrhofer).

Winterreise is a succession of vignettes, of psychological states, of atmospheric moments where the only temporary respite is one of the profound dichotomy between the past (the memories that have overwhelmed the narrator) and the present. The beginning of the journey is clear; the first song, *Gute Nacht* recounts it to us. Love has died very quickly, and the narrator has returned to the road. He had believed that he would be no more an outcast but this was only an illusion. He is from then on definitively alone again, condemned to wandering without purpose, and with a hostility that reflects the desolation in his heart. As the story advances, more or less symbolic images weave a spell creating the

topography of the winter journey: snow and ice (#3,4,6,7,8,20,22,24), wind that makes the weather vane rattle (#2) or makes leaves fall from the trees (#16), frightening crows (#8,11,15) and growling dogs (#1, 17, 24), deceptive lights in the night (#9,19), deserted landscapes... This is a journey without direction. This suffering wanderer finds neither peace nor accomplishment. Despite recurrent dreams of death, the last song suggests to us a final open door to the future, where the old organ-grinder is the *doppelgänger* of the hero. As the only person encountered during the cycle, he represents the place where unending pain is relived and recounted. “*On the brink of madness, the work ends here, but the story is not over.*” (Alfred Einstein)

Winterreise is a clearly bipartite cycle, where song #12 *Einsamkeit* represents the middle line. The first twelve songs form a unified group by the rather systematic preference for minor keys which are used in ten pieces of the twelve. Even the two pieces in major keys (#5 *Der Lindenbaum* and #11 *Frühlingstraum*), veer into the minor mode. In spite of the diversity of themes invoked, where so many images are summoned, the depiction of walking is here in abundance (songs #1,3,7,10 and 12).

The general slow moving tempo evident in #10 *Rast* and #12 *Einsamkeit* continues in part two. After #13 *Die Post*, the pace is marked by a progressive immobilization of tempos. The word ‘*langsam*’— ‘*slow*’ characterizes six songs of this set of twelve and the accompaniment figures are a musical translation of a static narrative. Whereas the tonal construction suggests a greater austerity of expression, the interaction of the singer and pianist creates a sense of conversation, with the voice notably leaning more and more towards recitative.

Schubert’s desire for a simple and accessible style of writing outshines *Die Schöne Müllerin*, with *Winterreise* profiting from a language that is more direct and more volatile. The severe reduction in the number of strophic songs between the two cycles is also a very clear indicator of this. We find a plethora of complex forms, use of recurring rhythmic motives that are as important as the melodic material; but all of these musical elements are made secondary to the breaking of the heart. Schubert makes the choice for expressivity, placing ideals of beauty as subservient to the urgency of expressing suffering, obsession, despair.

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