

# Words and Music: Schubert and Goethe

Franz Peter Schubert (1797-1828) died young, but not before he was able to compose music that has become justly famous. As well as symphonies, piano works, sacred music, and chamber works, he composed over 600 songs or *Lieder*. This essay considers a few of his over 70 settings for poems by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832)

## Life of Schubert

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Schubert developed numerous friends among the nobility, and among the singers and actors who entertained them. Joseph von Spaun, an important patron, hosted many musical evenings for Schubert and his friends. These became known as the "Schubertiades." The following oil sketch is by Moritz von Schwind (1804-1871). He had attended one of the Schubertiades as a young man and painted this from memory in 1868. Schubert is at the piano and the baritone, Johann Michael Vogl, is singing one of his songs.



## Erlkönig

One of Schubert's earliest songs was a setting for Goethe's 1782 poem *Erlkönig*. Goethe adapted the story an old Danish ballad wherein the daughter of the King of the Fairies chases after a man she desires. Goethe's poem tells the story of how a man rides through the night holding his young son in his arms. The Erlkönig desires the beautiful young boy for his own, and cajoles him to come away with him. Though the boy sees and hears the Erlkönig, his father dismisses his claims as illusions. Finally, the Erlkönig, unable to convince the child to come with him, takes the child by force. The father arrives home. His son is dead.

The poem deals with the mortality of children. Schubert's mother gave birth to 14 children but only 5 survived infancy. No matter how fast one's father rode, death claimed most children as his own. The poem also considers the nature of evil and desire: the powerful Erlkönig will have the child, no matter what. Desire triumphs: innocence is no defence.

The poem uses four distinct voices: the narrator, the father, the son, and the Erlkönig. These are shown in different colors

in the following text:

Wer reitet so spät durch Nacht und Wind?  
Es ist der Vater mit seinem Kind:  
Er hat den Knaben wohl in dem Arm,  
Er fasst ihn sicher, er hält ihn warm.

„Mein Sohn, was birgst du so bang dein Gesicht?“  
„Siehst, Vater, du den Erlkönig nicht?  
Den Erlenkönig mit Kron' und Schweif?“  
„Mein Sohn, es ist ein Nebelstreif.“

„Du liebes Kind, komm, geh mit mir!  
Gar schöne Spiele spiel' ich mit dir;  
Manch' bunte Blumen sind an dem Strand,  
Meine Mutter hat manch gülden Gewand.“

„Mein Vater, mein Vater, und hörest du nicht,  
Was Erlenkönig mir leise verspricht?“  
„Sei ruhig, bleibe ruhig, mein Kind:  
In dürren Blättern säuselt der Wind.“

„Willst, feiner Knabe, du mit mir gehn?  
Meine Töchter sollen dich warten schön;  
Meine Töchter führen den nächtlichen Rein  
Und wiegen und tanzen und singen dich ein.“

„Mein Vater, mein Vater, und siehst du nicht dort  
Erlkönigs Töchter am düstern Ort?“  
„Mein Sohn, mein Sohn, ich seh es genau:  
Es scheinen die alten Weiden so grau.“

„Ich liebe dich, mich reizt deine schöne Gestalt;  
Und bist du nicht willig, so brauch ich Gewalt.“  
„Mein Vater, mein Vater, jetzt fasst er mich an!  
Erlkönig hat mir ein Leids getan!“

Dem Vater grauset, er reitet geschwind,  
Er hält in Armen das ächzende Kind,  
Erreicht den Hof mit Mühe und Not:  
In seinen Armen das Kind war tot.

Who rides so late through night and wind?  
It is the father with his child.  
He carries the boy gently in his arms;  
he holds him safely, he keeps him warm.

‘My son, why do you hide your face in fear?’  
‘Father, can you not see the Erlking?  
The Erlking with his crown and tail?’  
‘My son, it is but a wisp of mist.’

‘Sweet child, come with me.  
I’ll play lovely games with you.  
Many pretty flowers grow on the shore;  
my mother has many a golden robe.’

‘Father, father, do you not hear  
what the Erlking softly promises me?’  
‘Be calm, be calm, my child:  
the wind is rustling in the withered leaves.’

‘Won’t you come with me, my fine lad?  
My daughters shall wait upon you;  
my daughters lead the nightly dance,  
and rock you and sing you to sleep.’

‘Father, father, can you not see  
Erlking’s daughters there in the darkness?’  
‘My son, my son, I can see clearly:  
it is the old grey willows gleaming.’

‘I love you, your fair form calls to me,  
and if you don’t come willingly, I’ll use force.’  
‘Father, father, now he’s seizing me!  
The Erlking has wounded me!’

The father shudders, he rides swiftly,  
he holds the moaning child in his arms;  
with one last effort he reaches home;  
the child lay dead in his arms.

Schubert composed his setting for *Erlkönig* in 1815 (Deutsch catalogue number 328). In 1821 it became his first published piece of music: Opus 1. The song is for one vocalist, but distinguishes the four different voices of the poem through different rhythmic and harmonic characteristics. In addition, the piano provides a fifth part: throughout the song, the right hand repeats in triplets the hoofbeats of the fleeing horse, while the left hand portrays its frantic breathing

(Bodley, 2023, pp 166-171; Gorrell, 1993, pp 112-116; Newbould, 1997, pp 57-59). Both singer and accompanist arrive totally exhausted at the ballad's end. The following shows the score for bars 10 to 21 of the song.

The image displays a musical score for a song, spanning bars 10 to 21. The score is written for piano (p) and voice. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats). The tempo/mood is marked *pp* (pianissimo).

**Bar 10:** The piano part features a continuous eighth-note accompaniment in the right hand and a simple bass line in the left hand. The vocal line is silent.

**Bar 13:** The vocal line begins with the word "Wer". The piano accompaniment continues with the eighth-note pattern in the right hand and a sustained bass note in the left hand.

**Bar 16:** The vocal line continues with the words "rei - tet so spät durch Nacht und". The piano accompaniment remains consistent.

**Bar 19:** The vocal line continues with the words "Wind? Es ist der". The piano accompaniment continues with the eighth-note pattern in the right hand and a sustained bass note in the left hand.

Below are performances by Sarah Walker accompanied on piano by Graham Johnson, and by Thomas Quasthoff accompanied by the Chamber Orchestra of Europe led by Claudio Abbado in an arrangement by Max Reger from 1914

## **Gretchen am Spinnrade**

Goethe's *Faust* (1808, lines 3374-3414) included a ballad sung by Gretchen (Margarete) who sits at her spinning wheel and thinks about her lover Faust:

*Meine Ruh' ist hin,  
Mein Herz ist schwer,  
Ich finde sie nimmer  
Und nimmermehr.*

Wo ich ihn nicht hab'  
Ist mir das Grab,  
Die ganze Welt  
Ist mir vergällt.

Mein armer Kopf  
Ist mir verrückt  
Mein armer Sinn  
Ist mir zerstückt.

*Meine Ruh' ist hin, ...*

Nach ihm nur schau' ich  
Zum Fenster hinaus,  
Nach ihm nur geh' ich  
Aus dem Haus.

Sein hoher Gang,  
Sein' edle Gestalt,  
Seines Mundes Lächeln,  
Seiner Augen Gewalt.

Und seiner Rede  
Zauberfluss.  
Sein Händedruck,  
Und ach, sein Kuss!

*Meine Ruh' ist hin, ...*

Mein Busen drängt sich  
Nach ihm hin.  
Ach dürft' ich fassen  
Und halten ihn.

Und küssen ihn  
So wie ich wollt'  
An seinen Küssen  
Vergehen sollt'!

*My peace is gone  
My heart is heavy;  
I shall never  
Ever find peace again.*

When he's not with me,  
Life's like the grave;  
The whole world  
Is turned to gall.

My poor head  
Is crazed,  
My poor mind  
Is shattered.

*My peace is gone ...*

It's only for him  
I gaze from the window,  
It's only for him  
I leave the house.

His proud bearing  
His noble form,  
The smile on his lips,  
The power of his eyes,

And the magic flow  
Of his words,  
The touch of his hand,  
And ah, his kiss!

*My peace is gone. ...*

My bosom  
Yearns for him.  
Ah! if I could clasp  
And hold him,

And kiss him  
To my heart's content,  
And in his kisses  
Pass away!

Mephistopheles is helping Faust to seduce the young and beautiful Gretchen. Gretchen is in love but feels intense anxiety. She will soon become pregnant and tragedy will ensue. Goethe partially based the story of Gretchen on the life of Susanna Margaretha Brandt, who was seduced, gave birth to an illegitimate child, murdered her child, and was then executed for infanticide in Frankfurt in 1772 (Birkner, 1999).

Schubert's setting of the song (D 118) was written in 1814 and later published as his Opus 2 in 1821. The piano accompaniment provides the rhythms of the spinning wheel in the right hand and the treadle in the left hand:

Singsstimme.

Mei - ne Ruh - ist

Pianoforte.

*sempre legato*

*pp*

*sempre staccato*

hin, mein Herz - ist schwer; ich fin - de, ich

*cresc.*

The song is a bravura representation of passion and foreboding (Bodley, 2023, pp160-166) The following is a performance by Dawn Upshaw with Richard Goode on piano.

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Gretchen-Am-Spinnrade-Upshaw.m4a>

Franz Liszt (1811-1886) was an early champion of Schubert's Lieder. In 1835-39, he published piano transcriptions of 12 Schubert Songs (S558). The piano arrangement of *Gretchen am*

*Spinnrade* (S558/8) includes an extra introduction, some thickening of the chords, and raising the “vocal” pitch by an octave for the last verse. The following is a performance by Idil Birit:

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Liszt-Gretchen-am-Spinnrade-Idil-Birit.m4a>

## **Gesang des Harfners**



In Book 2 of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* ("The Apprenticeship of Wilhelm Meister" 1808), Wilhelm searches out the lodgings of an old harpist, named Augustin, and listens to him singing. On the right is an illustration by William Sharp from the Heritage edition of the book. The words of the song are shown below in German and in a literal translation. Below these versions is the wildly poetic translation of Thomas Carlyle for the first English translation of Goethe's book

Wer nie sein Brot mit Tränen ass,  
Wer nie die kummervollen Nächte  
Auf seinem Bette weinend sass,  
Der kennt euch nicht, ihr himmlischen Mächte!

Who never ate his bread with tears  
And never through the painful nights  
Sat weeping on his bed  
Does not know you, heavenly powers!

Ihr führt ins Leben uns hinein,  
Ihr lasst den Armen schuldig werden,  
Dann überlasst ihr ihn der Pein:  
Denn alle Schuld rächt sich auf Erden.

You lead us into life,  
Let us wretches become guilty  
And then abandon us to pain  
For sin must be on earth requited.

Who never ate his bread in sorrow,  
Who never spent the darksome hours  
Weeping and watching for the morrow,  
He knows ye not, ye gloomy Powers.

To earth, this weary earth, ye bring us,  
To guilt ye let us heedless go,  
Then leave repentance fierce to wring us:  
A moment's guilt, an age of woe!

Schubert composed several settings for this song. The following version (D 480, 2; 1816), with tenor John Mark Ainsley accompanied by Graham Johnson, is a youthful questioning of theological implications of human suffering. If God is good and merciful, why do we have to suffer? When we make mistakes, why cannot we be forgiven?

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Gesang-des-Harfners-John-Mark-Ainsley.m4a>

A later version (D 480, 3; 1822) presents the song more as tragedy than as question. This setting is performed by baritone Thomas Quasthoff with Charles Spencer on piano.

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Gesang-des-Harfners-Thomas-Quasthoff.m4a>

## **Mignons Gesang**



In Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, Mignon is a traumatized young girl of 12 or 13 years, who was kidnaped in Italy and brought to Germany to perform with a theater troupe. She communicates only by song and dance. Wilhelm adopts her as his own child. In one of her songs, accompanied by the old harpist, she describes the feeling of longing for something that she cannot attain. The illustration on the right is by William Sharp. The words of her song are given below in German, in a literal English translation, and in a poetic translation by Thomas Carlyle:

Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt  
Weiss, was ich leide!  
Allein und abgetrennt  
Von aller Freude,  
Seh' ich an's Firmament  
Nach jener Seite.  
Ach! der mich liebt und kennt  
Ist in der Weite.  
Es schwindelt mir, es brennt  
Mein Eingeweide.  
Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt  
Weiss, was ich leide!

Only those who know longing  
Understand what I suffer!  
Alone and cut off  
From every joy,  
I search the world  
In all directions.  
Ah! he who loves and knows me  
Is far away.  
My head reels,  
My innards burn.  
Only those who know longing  
Understand what I suffer!

'Tis but who longing knows,  
My grief can measure.  
Alone, reft of repose,  
All joy, all pleasure,  
I thither look to those  
Soft lines of azure.  
Ah! far is he who knows  
Me, and doth treasure.  
I faint, my bosom glows  
Neath pain's sore pressure.  
'Tis but who longing knows,  
My grief can measure."

The following is a performance of Schubert's setting of Mignon's song (D877) by Nancy Argenta accompanied by Melvyn Tan on fortepiano:

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Mignon-D.877-Argenta-Tan.m4a>

## **Wandrer's Nachtlied**

Goethe wrote his first *Wanderer's Nightsong* in 1776. He had just become a courtier in Weimar and he sent this poem of youthful unrest to Charlotte von Stein, a lady in waiting at the court. The following is the German text and an English translation by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

Der du von dem Himmel bist,  
Alles Leid und Schmerzen stillest,  
Den, der doppelt elend ist,  
Doppelt mit Erquickung füllest;  
Ach, ich bin des Treibens müde!  
Was soll all der Schmerz und Lust?  
Süßer Friede,  
Komm, ach komm in meine Brust!

Thou that from the heavens art,  
Every pain and sorrow stillest,  
And the doubly wretched heart  
Doubly with refreshment fillest,  
I am weary with contending!  
Why this rapture and unrest?  
Peace descending  
Come, ah, come into my breast!

Schubert's musical setting (D 224, 1815) accentuates the tranquility of the poem's ending rather than the suffering at its beginning. He changed *Erquickung* (refreshment) to *Entzückung* (delight). As Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau remarked (1976, pp 43-44),

Anyone asking for peace in this fashion must have already found it.

The following is Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau's performance of the song with Jörg Demus on piano

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Wandrer-Nachtlied-1-fischer-dieskau.m4a>

And the illustration below gives the autograph:



Goethe wrote a second *Wandrer's Nachtlied* in 1780 on the wall of a gamekeeper's lodge where he stayed the night while hiking in the hills just outside of Ilmenau. Goethe visited the same lodge in 1831 just a few months before his death and recognized his writing on the wall. The following is the German text of the poem together with an English translation by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow:

Über allen Gipfeln  
Ist Ruh,  
In allen Wipfeln  
Spürest du  
Kaum einen Hauch;  
Die Vögelein schweigen im Walde.  
Warte nur, balde  
Ruhest du auch.

O'er all the hilltops  
Is quiet now,  
In all the treetops  
Hearest thou  
Hardly a breath;  
The birds are asleep in the trees:  
Wait, soon like these  
Thou too shalt rest.

The illustration below shows the poet as a young courtier in

1779 (Georg Meier) and as a venerated sage in 1828 (Joseph Stieler):



Schubert composed a setting for the poem (D 768) in 1822. At that time, he was 25 years old, younger than Goethe when he wrote the poem (31 years). The music beautifully presents the poet's yearning for peace. The following is a performance by Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and Jörg Demus on piano:

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Wandrer-Nachtlied-2-fischer-dieskau.m4a>

And the following is the song as performed by Kian Soltani on cello accompanied by Aaron Pilsan:

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Wandrer-Nachtlied-II-Kian-Soltani.m4a>

## **Life and Death**

Schubert contracted syphilis in 1822. Over the next few years, despite treatment with mercurials, the disease progressed, and

by 1828 had begun to involve the nervous system. In 1829 Schubert developed typhoid fever and this finally caused his death at the age of 31 years (Mckay, 1996, Chapter 12; Bevan 1998). Goethe was troubled throughout his life by a bipolar mood disorder but survived into his eighties (Steinberg & Schönknecht, 2020). Though he was born 48 years before Schubert, he died four years later than the young composer. Death comes when it must and pays no heed to genius.

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