Bright is the Ring of Words: English Art Song

During the 19th Century, composers began to set poems to music. In these "art songs" or *Lieder,* the piano accompaniment accentuated the emotions and complemented the meaning of the poem. Although Beethoven's *An die ferne Geliebte* (1816) was the first cycle of art songs, Schubert was the composer who definitively established the genre. He was followed by Schumann, Brahms, Wolf, and Mahler. In the British Isles, a golden age of art song occurred in the first 20 years of the 20th Century. Young composers, many trained in the German tradition, set to music both the lines they had learned in school and the poems of their contemporaries. The illustration is a wood cut from 1903 by Wassily Kandinsky.

Songs

Art songs (*Kunstlieder* in German) are often distinguished from folk songs (*Volkslieder*): art songs are musical settings for poetry that has been published in print, whereas the words and melodies for folk songs are handed down orally. However, some poets wrote ballads in the style of traditional folk songs, and some folk songs can be poetically complex. Art songs are also differentiated from popular songs by being "through-composed" (*durchkomponiert*) so that the melody varies with the meaning of the words, whereas popular songs typically use a simple repetitive rhythm. The accompaniment is typically more complex in art songs than in popular songs, often running in counterpoint to the voice. The words to art songs are created prior to the music, whereas words and music for popular songs are usually created simultaneously. Modern art songs are typically written for a solo voice with piano. However, in the Renaissance, similar songs (*ayres*) were written for lute accompaniment. Some composers, such as Mahler and Vaughan-

Williams, arranged their original piano setting for full orchestra. All distinctions tend to be fuzzy, and no one type of song is necessarily better than another. As stated in the Oxford Dictionary of Music (Kennedy et al., 2012) in the entry for "song"

> Brave the man or woman who will make a didactic value-judgement between *Dives and Lazarus, Gretchen am Spinnrade* and *Smoke gets in your eyes*.

Poetry and Music

Human speech has its own rhythm – prosody – and this can be heightened or regularized in poetry (Menninghaus et al. 2018). This is what makes poetry more appealing when recited out loud than when read silently. Listening to art song adds another dimension to the perceptual experience: one must attend both to the words and to the music (Campbell, 2023). Since it can be difficult to adjust the melody of the music to the rhythm of the poetry, some poets would prefer their poems not be set to music. Whitner (1957) quotes Victor Hugo who wrote on a manuscript of his verse, "Commit no nuisance along these poems by setting them to music." Nevertheless, in the better art songs, the music heightens the emotions of the words and makes their meaning more vivid and memorable.

The history of English Song (e.g., Kimball, 2005) suggests two Golden Ages. During the first (1580-1630) poems were set to music, with the lute being the typical accompaniment. In the second (the first half of the 20th Century), the songs were accompanied by piano. The following sections consider nine English art songs composed during first two decades of the 20th Century. Each is presented as text, as recitation, and as song, with some also presented as music alone.

Now Sleeps the Crimson Petal

Now sleeps the crimson petal, now the white;
Nor waves the cypress in the palace walk;
Nor winks the gold fin in the porphyry font:
The firefly wakens: waken thou with me.

Now droops the milkwhite peacock like a ghost,
And like a ghost she glimmers on to me.

Now lies the Earth all Danaë to the stars,
And all thy heart lies open unto me.

Now slides the silent meteor on, and leaves
A shining furrow, as thy thoughts in me.

Now folds the lily all her sweetness up,
And slips into the bosom of the lake:
So fold thyself, my dearest, thou, and slip
Into my bosom and be lost in me.

This poem by Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809-1892) was extracted from his long narrative poem *The Princess* (1847), wherein Princess Ida forswears the world of men and establishes a university for women. The story was likely derived from Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost*, and was itself adapted by Gilbert and Sullivan into the operetta *Princess Ida*. The 14-line unrhymed poem is spoken by the Princess as she cares for the wounded Prince in Canto VII of the poem. As she invokes the sunset, she realizes that she feels more deeply for him than she had thought. The reference to Danaë, the beautiful young woman who was impregnated by Zeus in the form of a shower of golden rain, accentuates the underlying erotic feelings in the lines.

The following illustration shows Gustav Klimt's *Danaë* (1907):

The following is a recitation of the poem by Simon Russell Beale

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/crimson_petal_beale.mp3

Roger Quilter (1877-1953) set the poem to music in 1902. The following is a performance by baritone Benjamin Luxon accompanied by David Willison on piano.

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/quilter_crimson_petal_luxon.mp3

And the following is a transcription of Quilter’s song-setting

by Steven Hough.

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/crimson-petal-hough.mp3

Aedh wishes for the cloths of heaven

Had I the heaven’s embroidered cloths,
Enwrought with golden and silver light,
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
Of night and light and the half-light,

I would spread the cloths under your feet:
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

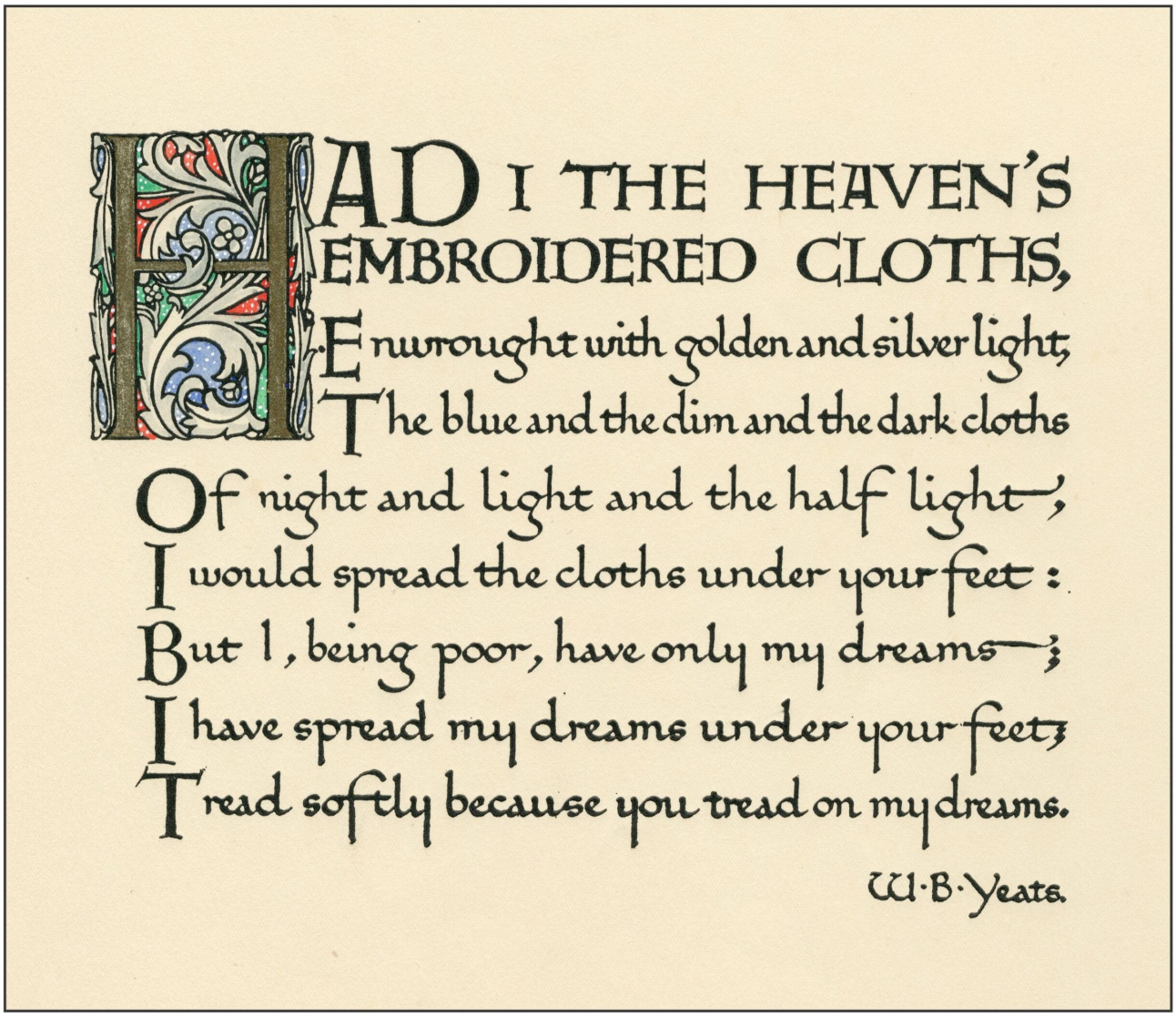
William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) published this poem in *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899). The speaker is Yeats using the persona of *Aedh* (a name that means “fire” in Irish), a lovelorn, visionary poet. The poem, clearly related to Yeats’s unrequited love for Maud Gonne, is recited by Greg Wise:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/yeats_cloths_wise.mp3

Thomas Dunhill (1877-1946) published a cycle of songs from Yeats’ *The Wind among the Reeds* in 1904, later revising them for orchestral accompaniment in 1912. The following is a performance by tenor Ian Bostridge with Julius Drake on piano:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/dunhill_cloths_bostridge.mp3

The following is the poem in calligraphy as published by the Cuala Press, established in 1908 by Elizabeth Yeats, the poet’s brother.



Bright is the Ring of Words

Bright is the ring of words
  When the right man rings them,
Fair the fall of songs
  When the singer sings them.

Still they are carolled and said —
  On wings they are carried —
After the singer is dead
  And the maker buried.

Low as the singer lies

In the field of heather,
Songs of his fashion bring
The swains together.

And when the west is red
With the sunset embers,
The lover lingers and sings
And the maid remembers.

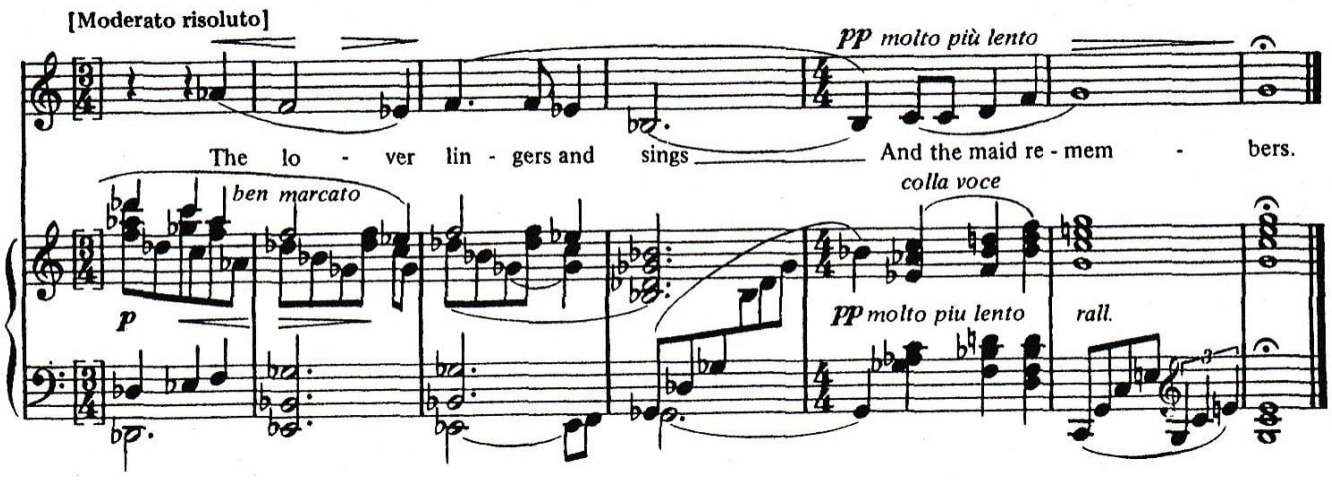
The poem comes from *Songs of Travel* (1896) by Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894). F*aute de mieux* the following is my recitation of the poem:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/Stevenson-Bright-tp.mp3

Stevensons considered the poems as “songs,” and Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958) set the words to music in 1904 as part of *The Vagabond and Other Songs*. The following is a performance by baritone Bryn Terfel with Malcom Martineau on piano:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/vaughan_williams_bright_terfel.mp3

The score at the song’s end illustrates the complexity of the accompaniment:



Down by the Salley Gardens

Down by the salley gardens my love and I did meet;
She passed the salley gardens with little snow-white feet.
She bid me take love easy, as the leaves grow on the tree;
But I, being young and foolish, with her would not agree.

In a field by the river my love and I did stand,
And on my leaning shoulder she laid her snow-white hand.
She bid me take life easy, as the grass grows on the weirs;
But I was young and foolish, and now am full of tears.

William Butler Yeats published this poem in 1889. He extrapolated it from a few lines of an old song sung by a peasant woman in County Sligo. The word “salley” is a variant of a “sallow,” which is another word for the willow tree (Latin *Salix*). These trees were cultivated to provide materials for baskets, fences and roofs. A weir is a low dam of rocks or wood built across a river to raise the level of the upstream water. Settling and other irregularities can cause portions of the weir to rise above the water level, and become covered in grass. The grass on the weirs thus suggests an islet of rest in the turbulent waters flowing around it. The following is a recitation of the poem by Jim Norton:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/Salley-Gardens-Jim-Norton.mp3

Herbert Hughes (1882-1937), an Irish composer, set the poem in 1909 to the tune of a traditional Irish air called *The Maids of Moune Shore*. The following is a classical performance of this setting by the contralto Kathleen Ferrier with Phyllis

Spurr on piano:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/Ferrier-Salley-Gardens.mp3

And another by countertenor Daniel Taylor accompanied by Sylvain Bergeron on lute. This performance gives the impression of a Renaissance *Ayre*.

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/Taylor-Salley-Gardens.mp3

The following is a performance of the Hughes tune adapted for cello (Gerald Peregrine) and violin (Lynda O'Connor):

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/Salley-Gardens-Violin-Cello.mp3

Loveliest of Trees the Cherry Now

Loveliest of trees the cherry now
Is hung with bloom along the bough
And stands about the woodland ride
Wearing white for Eastertide.

Now of my three score years and ten,
twenty will not come again.
And take from seventy years a score,
It only leaves me fifty more.

And since to look at things in bloom,
Fifty Springs is little room,
About the woodlands I will go
To see the cherry hung with snow.

This poem, published by A. E. Housman (1859-1936) in his *A Shropshire Lad* (1896), has been widely anthologized and set to music numerous times. The following is a recitation by Emma Fielding:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/housman_loveliest_fielding.mp3

George Butterworth (1895-1916) was the first composer to set the poem to music in 1912. The following is a performance by Benjamin Luxon with David Willison on piano:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/butterworth_cherry_luxon.mp3

Sonnet 18

Shall I compare thee to a Summer’s day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And Summer’s lease hath all too short a date:
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And oft’ is his gold complexion dimm’d;
And every fair from fair sometime declines,

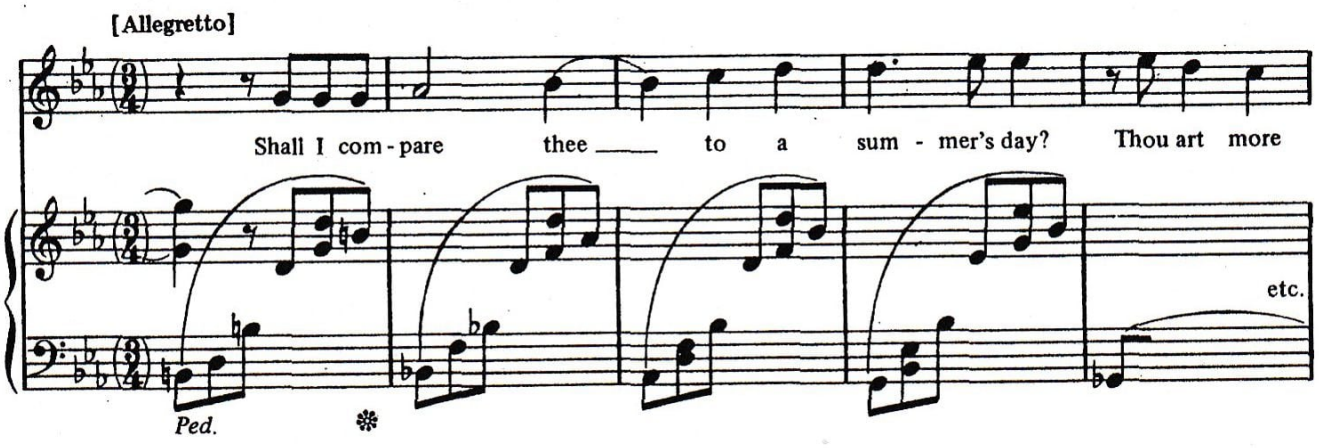
> By chance or nature’s changing course untrimm’d:
> But thy eternal Summer shall not fade
> Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest;
> Nor shall Death brag thou wanderest in his shade,
> When in eternal lines to time thou growest:
> So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
> So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

All the art songs considered so far used poems published in the years just before the composers set the music. The composers also used earlier poems – particularly those from the late 16th to early 17th Centuries. William Shakespeare (1564-1616) published his sonnets in 1609. The following is a recitation of his 18th Sonnet by Hugh Grant:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/shakespeare_sonnet18_grant.mp3

Frederick Septimus Kelly (1881-1916) was born in Australia and educated in England. As well as studying music, he was a gold medalist in rowing at the 1908 Olympics. His setting for Shakespeare’s sonnet was published in 1912. According to Banfield (1885, p 141),

> The treatment of the opening line, the searching for a comparison, is particularly happy: the intermediate dominant of the relative minor leads in as if with a gradual concentration of the mind.



The following is a performance by baritone Stephen Varcoe with Clifford Benson on piano:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/kelly_shakespeare_varcoe.mp3

To Gratiana Dancing and Singing

See! with what constant motion
Even and glorious, as the sun,
Gratiana steers that noble frame,
Soft as her breast, sweet as her voice,
That gave each winding law and poise,
And swifter than the wings of Fame.

She beat the happy pavement
By such a star-made firmament,
Which now no more the roof envies;
But swells up high with Atlas ev’n,
Bearing the brighter, nobler Heav’n,
And in her, all the Dieties.

Each step trod out a lovers thought
And the ambitious hopes he brought,
Chain’d to her brave feet with such arts,
Such sweet command and gentle awe,
As when she ceas’d, we sighing saw
The floor lay pav’d with broken hearts.

So did she move: so did she sing:
Like the harmonious spheres that bring
Unto their rounds their music’s aid;
Which she performed such a way,
As all th’enamour’d world will say:
The Graces danced, and Apollo play’d.

Richard Lovelace (1617-1657) was a Cavalier Poet who fought on

the side of Charles I during the English Civil War (1642–1651). Most of his poems, many dedicated to various idealized mistresses such as Althea, Lucasta, and Gratiana (Cousins, 1988), were collected and published posthumously. The following is a reading of the poem by *Cavaet* from Librivox.

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/gratiana_lovelace_caveat.mp3

William Denis Browne (1888–1915), an English composer, set Lovelace's poem (omitting the second verse) to music in 1913. He based his melody on an *Allmayne* (a dance form originating in Germany, also called *Allemande)* from the 17th-Century *Virginal Book* of Elizabeth Rogers. The following is a performance by tenor Ian Bostridge with Julius Drake on piano:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/denis_browne_gratiana_bostridge.mp3

Sea-Fever

I must down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the sky,
And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by,
And the wheel's kick and the wind's song and the white sail's shaking,
And a grey mist on the sea's face, and a grey dawn breaking.

I must down to the seas again, for the call of the running tide
Is a wild call and a clear call that may not be denied;
And all I ask is a windy day with the white clouds flying,
And the flung spray and the blown spume, and the sea-gulls crying.

> I must down to the seas again, to the vagrant gypsy life,
> To the gull’s way and the whale’s way where the wind’s like a whetted knife;
> And all I ask is a merry yarn from a laughing fellow-rover
> And quiet sleep and a sweet dream when the long trick’s over.

John Masefield (1878-1967) joined HMS Conway, a naval training ship in 1891 and spent much of his life in the 1890s at sea. This poem comes from his first book, *Salt-Water Ballads* (1902). The poems from this first volume were published together with later poems in 1916 as *Salt-Water Poems and Ballads,* which was profusely illustrated by Charles Pears (1873-1958). This is Pears’s depiction of the first two lines of *Sea-Fever*:

The following is a recitation of the poem by Terence Stamp:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/sea_fever_stamp.mp3

John Nicholson Ireland (1879-1962) set Masefield's poem to music in 1913. The following is a performance by baritone Bryn Terfel with Malcolm Martineau on piano:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/ireland_sea_fever_terfel.mp3

Epitaph

Here lies a most beautiful lady,
Light of step and heart was she:
I think she was the most beautiful lady
That ever was in the West Country.

But beauty vanishes; beauty passes;
However rare, rare it be;
And when I crumble who shall remember
This lady of the West Country?

Walter de la Mare (1873-1956) published this brief but powerful poem in *The Listeners and Other Poems* (1912). In 1934 he made a recording of this and other poems. The following represents my best effort to decrease the high levels of noise:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/de-la-mare-epitaph.mp3

Arthur L Wood provides a much clearer recitation:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/Epitaph-Arthur-L-Wood.mp3

Ivor Gurney (1890-1937), an English poet and composer, set the

poem to music in 1920. The following is a performance by the baritone Benjamin Luxon with David Willison on piano:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/gurney_epitaph_luxon.mp3

Lament

Many of the composers active during the early years of the 20th Century died in World War I. William Denis Browne died at Gallipoli in 1915. William Septimus Kelly and George Butterworth both died in the Battle of the Somme in 1916. Ivor Gurney was irrevocably affected by his injuries during the war, and spent much of his time afterwards in psychiatric hospitals. Two weeks before he died at the Battle of the Somme, Kelly began writing a *Lament.* His original piano score was recently adapted for orchestra by Christopher Latham. The following is an arrangement for violin and piano with Latham playing the violin and Tamara Anna Cislowska playing the piano:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/Somme-Lament-Violin-Piano.mp3

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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

Schubert was born and died in Vienna. His father, a teacher, recognized his gift

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Wilhelm August Rieder from 1825:

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 poemtells 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 grausets, 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.'

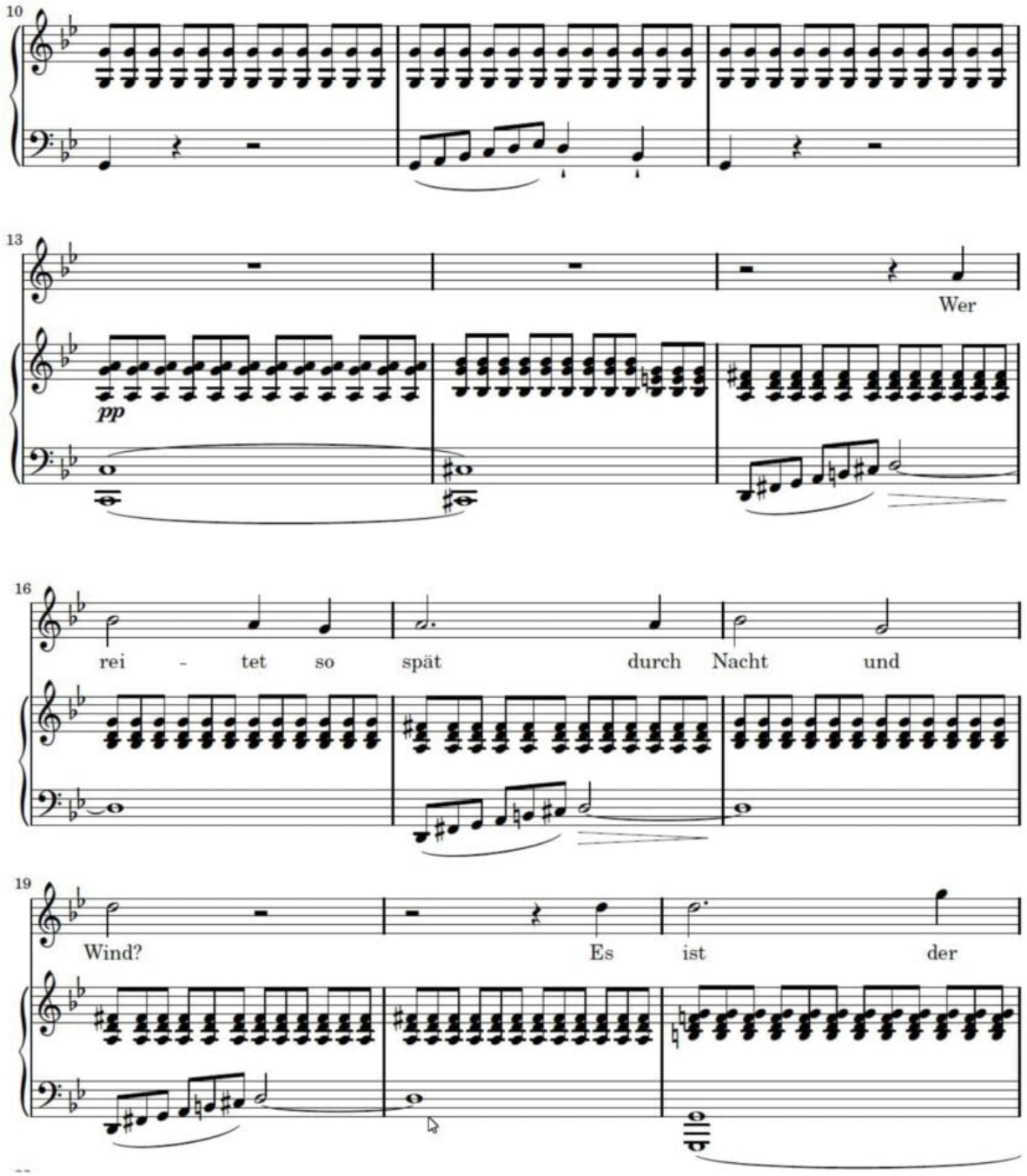
'Father, father, can you not see
Erlking's daughters there in the darkness?'
'My son, my son, I can see clearly:
it is the old grey willows gleaming.'

'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.



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!

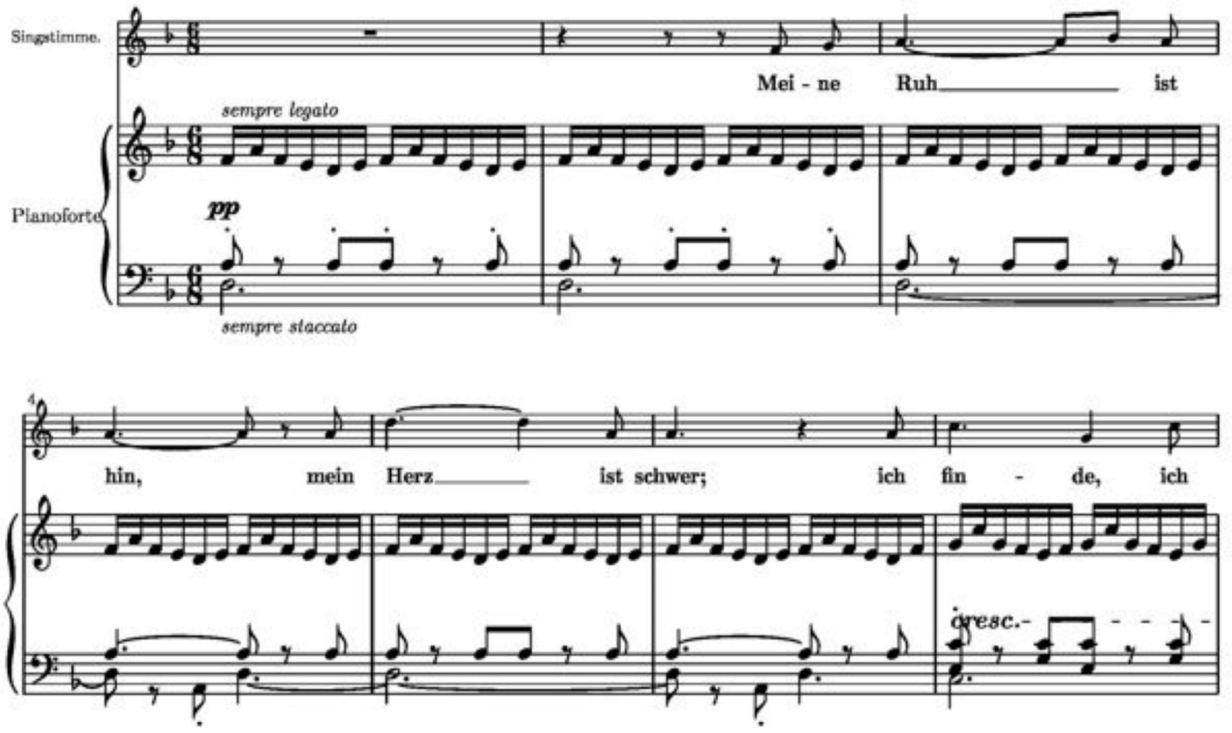
My peace is gone. ...

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:



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 Geothe'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!

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.

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

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 af 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

Wandrers 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,	Thou that from the heavens art,
Alles Leid und Schmerzen stillest,	Every pain and sorrow stillest,
Den, der doppelt elend ist,	And the doubly wretched heart
Doppelt mit Erquickung füllest;	Doubly with refreshment fillest,
Ach, ich bin des Treibens müde!	I am weary with contending!
Was soll all der Schmerz und Lust?	Why this rapture and unrest?
Süßer Friede,	Peace descending
Komm, ach komm in meine Brust!	Come, ah, come into my breast!

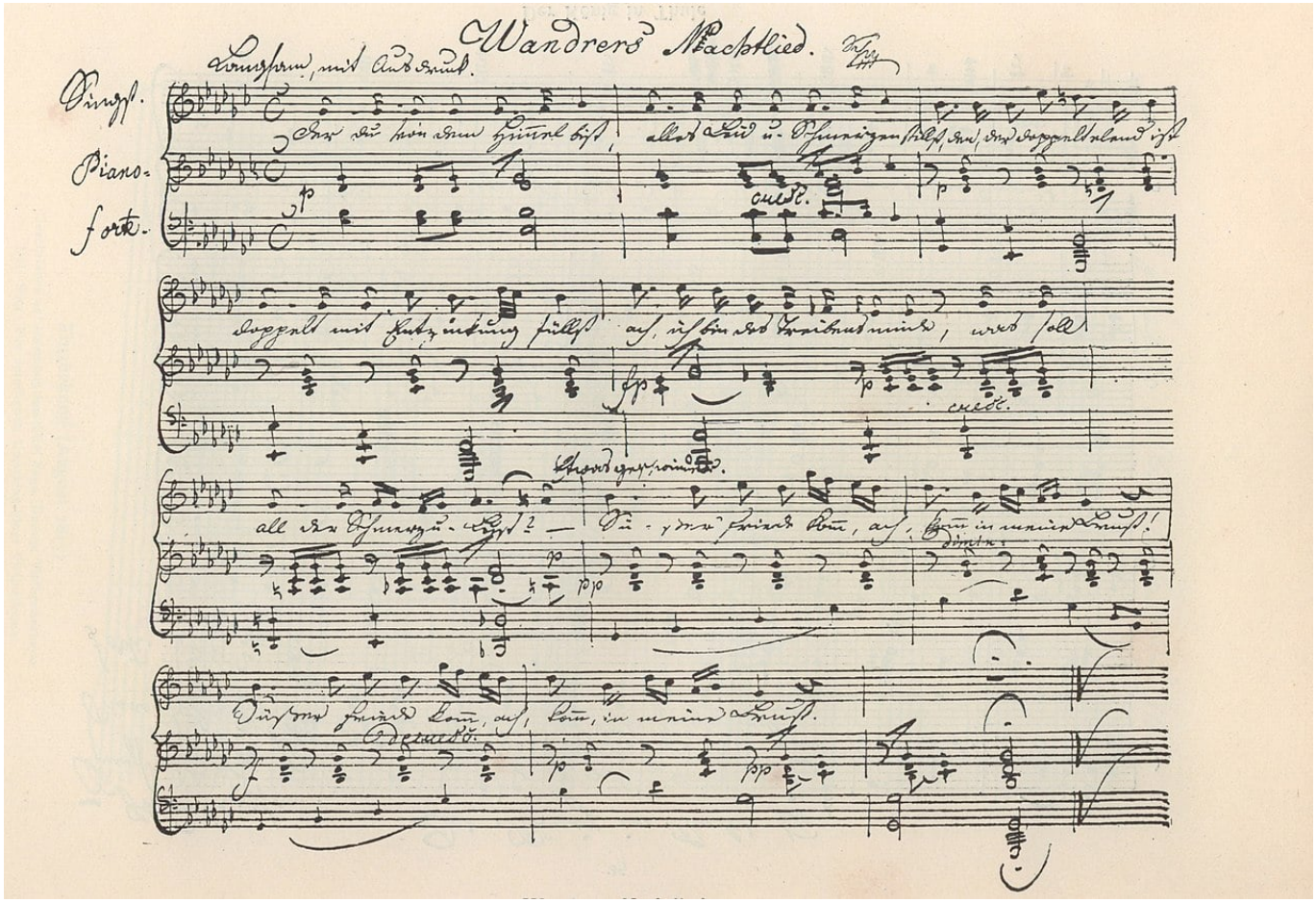
Schubert's musical setting (D 224, 1815) accentuates the tranquility of the poem's ending rather than the suffering at its beginning. He changed *Erquickung* (refreshment) to *Entzückung* (delight). As Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau remarked (1976, pp 43-44),

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/Wandrers-Nachtlied-1-fischer-dieskau.m4a

And the illustration below gives the autograph:



Goethe wrote a second *Wandrers 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	O'er all the hilltops
Ist Ruh,	Is quiet now,
In allen Wipfeln	In all the treetops
Spürest du	Hearest thou
Kaum einen Hauch;	Hardly a breath;
Die Vögelein schweigen im Walde.	The birds are asleep in the trees:
Warte nur, balde	Wait, soon like these
Ruhest du auch.	Thou too shalt rest.

The illustration below shows the poet as a young courtier in

1779 (Georg May) 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/Wandrers-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/Wandrers-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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