

Pattern Disalignment in Franz Schubert's "Der Atlas"

I hear a structural gap of pattern disalignment between the voice and the piano accompaniment in mm. 39-43 of Schubert's "Der Atlas" that acts as an intensifying agent in expressing the despair of Henrich Heine's poetry in the musical climax of mm. 49-52.

In the introduction of "Der Atlas," the piano sets precedence for the emotional instability of the song by setting up a static G minor sonority; a repeated pattern of right hand tremolo is accented by the left hand playing a lower neighbor figure. I hear the accented lower neighbor on the downbeat of m. 2 as a wrench thrown over-determinedly into the gears of a clear establishment of the key of G minor. This exceedingly heavy ornament in m. 2 creates a tension that foreshadows the structural gap that occurs in mm. 39-43. This tension is slightly abated with the entrance of the voice in the pickup in mm. 5-6; the voice sings in unison with the left hand of the piano while the right hand reharmonizes the pitch F-sharp with a dominant 6/5 chord, thus clarifying the F-sharp as a leading tone rather than an ominous lower neighbor.

Example 1: "Der Atlas," mm. 5-6 with my markings



Significantly, when Schubert returns to the text of the 1st stanza in mm. 39-40, the piano figure in G minor from mm. 5-6 is juxtaposed against the vocal material from mm. 4-5. That is, instead of the voice singing in unison with the left hand of the piano as before, the voice comes in a measure early,

defying the alignment of the voice and accompaniment at the beginning of the song and creating a more complex and disorienting resulting pattern.

Example 2: “Der Atlas,” mm. 39-44, with my markings denoting repeated material

Both the vocal line and the piano part have to be slightly rewritten to make this new verticality function tonally: the melody starts an octave higher in m. 40 than in m. 5 and descends to a “me-do” phrase ending in m. 41 rather than to the pitch F-sharp as in m. 6. The vocal melody also has a flavorful upper neighbor at the pickup to m. 42 when this new phrase is repeated. The piano and voice reconverge onto the material from m. 10 at m. 44 as the voice skips m.9, but the structural gap created by this misalignment is not yet fully closed. After repeating the material from mm. 10-14 in mm. 44-48 together, the voice repeats the text “Die ganze Welt der Schmerzen muß ich tragen” one last time while ascending to a pitch A-flat, the highest in the piece, while the piano tremolos an Augmented 6th chord over a G minor pedal in m. 50. The structural gap of mm. 39-43 points toward and is resolved by the most intense and tonally distant moment in the piece at m. 50. Thus, Schubert artfully expresses the

sadist despair of Heine's poetry in musical form by twisting the supposed evident meaning of mm. 5-6 into the structural gap of mm. 39-43 that ultimately resolves in mm. 49-51.