Schubert’s *Das Echo*, illustrating the prelude as a synopsis

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This rather little-known song has one of the last identifying numbers in the Deutsch catalogue, D990C, which was changed from the earlier D868 because its date of composition, possibly 1826-1828, is not known with certainty. The poem, by Ignaz Franz Castelli (Figure 1), is light-hearted and amusing. It involves a girl Liese, her suitor Hans, and her mother. The mother has caught the pair in an indiscretion, said to be a kiss. The girl is at pains to explain that away to her mother, blaming the indiscretion on a series of misunderstandings caused by modified echoes of the last words of Hans’s questions to her. The series of echo words is Hügel/Bügel, willkommen/Kommen!, erfreulich/Freilich!, nimmer/Immer!, küsse?/Küsse!, begehren/Ehren, and kränken/denken. In the last verse Liese reveals everything to her mother: Liese and Hans would like to marry and, if the mother disapproves after meeting him, she should provide him with the echo explanation, otherwise with the admission that Liese herself was the echo (which the listener, with a wink, may have suspected all along).

![Ignaz Franz Castelli (1781-1862), poet and dramatist (Deutsch, 1913, p.493.).](image1.png)

![Franz Peter Schubert (1797-1828) (from a painting by Wilhelm August Rieder).](image2.png)

A word about editions: the first was by Weigl in 1830 as op.130 with all seven verses, the next by Diabelli in 1832 (not mentioned in Deutsch/Aderhold, 1978) in an unchanged reproduction (Reed, 1985, p.73 incorrectly says that Diabelli omitted verse 7). Verse 4 is omitted, for a reason which I do not know, in some of the more recent editions and in the translations by Wigmore, 1988, p.74 and Reed, 1985, p.73. No English translation of verse 4 has been published to my knowledge, so I provide mine here:

Vergnügt sagt' er mir weiter,  
Er wäre mir schon oft  
Von fern gefolgt, und habe

He cheerfully revealed to me  
That he had often  
Followed me from afar,
Zu sprechen mich gehofft,  
Doch fruchtlos war es immer,  
Denn mach' er's noch so fein,  
Bemerkt hätt’ ich ihn nimmer. -

“Immer!”
Fiel schnell das Echo ein.

Hoping to speak to me.
But it never came to anything,
For he did it with such restraint
That I had never noticed him. -

“Every time!”
The echo promptly chimed in.

Schubert has represented the echos simply by repeating the relevant bar pianissimo; the last two bars of each verse, however, are not echos but instead reinforcements, represented by slightly modified repetition.

I will focus here on the prelude (Example 1, Breitkopf und Härtel edition here and throughout). This does not provide an introduction to the musical material, nor a picture of the poetical scene, but instead a synopsis of the poem and song as a whole, that is, a concise view of their essence. Thus Schubert has, as he so often did, distilled the poem into its main ideas and represented them succinctly on the piano without words.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Mässig.} & \\
\text{He approaches . . . . . and asks the question, echoed;} & \\
\text{she slightly hesitates . . . the answer is 'yes', echoed.}
\end{align*}
\]

**Example 1.** Schubert, *Das Echo* D990C bars 1-6, with a possible interpretation.

The first half of the prelude refers to Hans. In bar 1 he is portrayed as approaching with a light step. Bar 2 begins with a turn which is part of his question and evidently represents his asking for a kiss (compare the turn in bar 12 on ‘kiss’). The question is then completed with an upward lilt and contrary motion as if opening his eyes and arms wide with hopeful anticipation. Bar 3 repeats the question in an echo; during the fermata the echo is slowly dying away while he is waiting for an answer. The second half of the prelude refers to Liese. Her first harmonies are slightly weak, suggesting a degree of reticence, but they then become strong, with a perfect cadence expressing affirmation. Bar 6 echoes the affirmation, again with a dying-away fermata. Thus three ideas are all concisely represented here: a question, an answer and an echo.
This representation is similar to the one Schubert used in *Der Neugierige* D795/6, where the prelude again provides a synopsis, its material appearing nowhere else in the song (Example 2).

![Example 2. Schubert, *Der Neugierige* D795/6 bars 1-4, with a possible interpretation.](image)

**Example 2.** Schubert, *Der Neugierige* D795/6 bars 1-4, with a possible interpretation.

Here again the first half represents the question and the second half represents the positive answer. In this case there is only one actor, the boy. He is not directing his question to the girl but instead to his friend the brooklet. The answer given is the one the boy is imagining and earnestly hoping for. In *Der Neugierige* the boy is not shown approaching, just asking the question, again in contrary motion to the bass; the question is much more tentatively expressed, reflecting the different character of this boy (and there is no echo effect).

The concluding cadences to the preludes are very similar between the two songs, and they are real Schubertian ones with his very typical pattern of note lengths, including the lengths of the upbeat and of the long appoggiatura (the resolution note is longer in *Das Echo* reflecting the somewhat prolonged dying-away of the echo). Note also the absence of concurrent notes elsewhere in the musical texture during the dissonance, which would interfere with the smoothness of the long gesture implied by the music. That pattern is found throughout Schubert’s music, not only at cadences, and may be called a ‘fingerprint’ of the composer. Another example occurs in the *Moment musical* D780/6 (Example 3), where two preparatory gestures, in bars 13 and 14, lead up to the main one. Indeed, the study of works with text can assist the understanding of what is expressed in purely instrumental works by the same composer although, when there are no words to point us in the right direction or to confirm our inference, it is usually much harder to be sure. For instance, the cadential fingerprint, used in *Das Echo* and *Der Neugierige* to express a positive answer, may provide a gesture of caressing, compassion or comfort in some non-vocal music. I believe this cadential fingerprint is the one which, by comparison with his other fingerprints not discussed here, most strongly makes us recognise and feel at one with Schubert. That may be especially so in bars 15-16 of *Das Echo* (the running eighth-notes in the accompaniment do not interfere with the smooth gesture expressing reassurance in verse 1) (Example 4). To discuss Schubert’s fingerprints further here, though, would be to move too far afield.


The reappearance of the prelude before each verse of *Das Echo* and at the end of the song confirms its function as a synopsis, for it remains the same and does not take part in the ongoing action, nor can its meaning be grasped until the last verse has been sung. I can recommend playing through that prelude many times, or listening to it, savouring its detailed significance as well as its beautiful formation.

Let us now consider the decision on the manner of performing this song, including its tempo. The general character of the song is obviously important for that decision, and here the character follows from the girl’s confiding in her mother. The manner should therefore be fairly gentle as the girl gives her explanation, no doubt somewhat intimately and earnestly. The character, and thus the tempo, is confirmed by the voice’s entry in bars 7-8 with “Herzliebe, gute Mutter”, the first two notes corresponding to a confiding manner, with their descending sixth interval. One may compare in this respect the similar (just slightly larger) descending interval at “Mein Bächlein will ich fragen”, again from *Der Neugierige* D795/6, as the boy decides to confide in the brook (Example 5). The same figure occurs almost thematically in *An die Musik* D547, where Schubert confides in music itself with a gesture of endearment. Why did Schubert write those descending intervals? No purely musical reason is seen, but the likely answer is that they follow the manner of speech, especially Viennese speech, and the sentiment involved. More generally it is clear that Schubert has set primarily the first verse of *Das Echo*, the performers readily adapting to the other verses of the strophic setting.
An appropriate tempo for the song is suggested by the character of the poem and composition, discussed above, but that suggestion may be confirmed or denied by the composer’s marking, in this case Mässig (moderate). It is often helpful to compare a given song with others written somewhat similarly. In this case we therefore search for others marked Mässig and in 2/2 metre (or other similar metre) and if possible with 8 notes per bar as the general level of division. Some of the better-known ones are An die Musik D547, Wiegenlied D795/20 and Das Lied im Grünen D917. They seem to confirm the tempo suggested by the character of the poem and composition. (Der Tod und das Mädchen D531 is also similarly written, but its supposed metronome mark half-note = 54 might be untrustworthy.)

As the present song is not well known, I will comment briefly on a few recordings, listed here chronologically:

(1) Martina Arroyo/Leonard Hokanson (1968 SWR Classic, Naxos)
(2) Christine Schäfer/Graham Johnson (1996 Hyperion vol 26)
(3) Daniela Sindram/Ulrich Eisenlohr (2007, Naxos)
(4) Katja Stuber/Boris Kusnezow (2016, Conditura)

All seem to me good performances, and the differences will just call into play personal taste. The poem’s verses included in those recordings are:

(1) 1,2,3, 7
(2) 1,2,3, 5,6,7
(3) 1, 3, 5,6,7 (sung in A major)
(4) 1,2,3, 5, 7
The echo bars are not all sung more softly, and some are even *ff*, which is legitimate considering the different contexts in the poem. The tempos are fairly similar except for (4), which is a good deal faster. The accompaniments are also played fairly similarly but again (4) varies by adding improvisatory material to verses 3 and 5 with a rapid scale, a rush of broken chords and an upper appoggiatura; although original thinking is always welcome and these additions may be defensible according to the poetic context, their style in this recording could unfortunately not be called Schubertian.

If we listen carefully to the recordings we may notice a slight misreading of the score: the lower note of the turn in bars 2 and 3 of each verse (Example 1) is correctly played by Hokanson and Eisenlohr a semitone lower (a-natural), but by Johnson and Kusnezow it is played a whole tone lower (a-flat). The misreading makes a less satisfying impression in my opinion, although this is admittedly a small point.

I hope readers will now feel well prepared to listen to this song, and I’m sure they will enjoy it!

References


Editions of Schubert, *Das Echo*:


CDs of performances: see the main body of this article.