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Editorial

Welcome to the July issue of *The Schubertian*! In this edition, the focus is firmly on Schubert's vocal music – both Lieder and choral works. John Uff reflects on two rather different performances of Schubert's Masses, while Nigel Nettheim offers a close reading of the “Battle Song” D912 for double choir, with its intriguing formal structure. SIUK Vice-President Graham Johnson then introduces us to the role that digitisation and the internet have played in Schubert research, outlining a number of exciting recent discoveries.

For this year's special “*Celebrating Die schöne Müllerin*” section, Paul Reid – former SIUK chairman and *Schubertian* Editor – casts the spotlight on the autobiographical elements of the cycle. In his insightful article, he examines the various ways in which *Die schöne Müllerin* reflects the lives and psyches of both its poet and composer.

Another thread of this issue is that of celebrating the successes of our SIUK members. These include a report of a piano recital performed by our very own Membership Secretary Ruth Minton, and several congratulatory announcements (see *In Brief*). We are always pleased to share news, articles, reflections, and reviews of interest to our membership, so if you would like to contribute, please do contact me at siukschubertian@gmail.com. In particular, if you have been meaning to make a submission for the bicentenary anniversary of *Die schöne Müllerin*, now is your last chance!

Heppy Longworth

Articles

Schubert's "Rhythmic Canon" for the "Battle Song", D912 of 1827

Schubert first set Klopstock's "Battle Song" in 1816 (as "Schlachtgesang"), and then again in 1827 (as "Schlachtlied"). I had discussed the first setting, D443, in *The Schubertian* 116 (October 2022, pp. 42-45), showing it to be rather straightforward. The second setting, D912, however, is far from straightforward. To begin, here are some important facts about this work:

- (1) Schubert chose it to end his one and only public concert of his own works. That concert took place on 26 March 1828, Schubert having composed this work in February 1827.
- (2) It is written for unaccompanied double four-voiced choir, all male (tenors and basses), the only use of those forces by any composer as far as I know.¹
- (3) The form is unique in all of music, and specially tailored to the purpose.
- (4) Much of the music may be found almost impossible to follow in detail by listening to a performance, because of its dense and uniform texture.

The poetic text, discussed briefly in my earlier article on D443, has short verses that may be paraphrased in groups:

¹ It was also published by Diabelli in 1845 with a piano or harmonium accompaniment.

Verses 1-5: We soldiers cannot win without the help of the Almighty.

Verses 6-12: Let us now go into battle, sneering at death and at you, our enemy!

Verse 13: We again call for the help of the Almighty.

Verse 14: We will strike now, sneering at death and at you, our enemy!

For the present musical purpose, as will be seen below, Schubert gave up the distinction between the first two groups of verses, instead dividing them as 6 + 6, rather than as 5 + 7. That was a notable sacrifice, as Schubert almost always reflected the poetic significance in his musical settings (excepting some verses in strophic songs).

Apart from taking advantage of its stirring effect as the concluding item for his concert, it seems likely that Schubert intended to show his compositional powers in an impressive light with a novel kind of canon between two choirs, a very ambitious undertaking never, I believe, seen before or since. The following analysis is included here because there is, to my knowledge, no published analysis of this work; that is, no attempt at an explanation of how Schubert put it together (I would be glad to be corrected there, as elsewhere).

First presentation: verses 1-6

The first choir leads alone with verses 1-2, starting as in **Example 1** and ending with old-style conventional cadences; the second choir

follows, also alone, with verses 3-4, starting as in **Example 2** and ending with the same cadences. The music, so far, quite closely resembles that of D443.

Nicht zu geschwind, kraftvoll

I
T. Mit un-serm Arm ist nichts ge-tan, steht un-ser Mäch-ti-ge nicht bei,
B.

II
T.
B.

Example 1: “Schlachtgesang”, D912, bars 1-4.

Choirs I & II, tenors & basses.

I
T. 16
B. 16

II
T. 16
B. 16
Ver-ge-bens flie-sset un-ser Blut, für's Va-ter-land, wenn der nicht hilft,

Example 2: “Schlachtgesang”, D912, bars 16-19.

Choirs I & II, tenors & basses.

31

T. I Ströhm' hin, o Blut, für's Va - ter - land, und tödt', o Tod, wir trau - en dem,

B. I

31

T. II Ströhm' hin, o Blut, für's Va - ter - land, und tödt', o Tod,

B. II

Example 3: “Schlachtgesang”, D912, bars 31-34.

Choirs I & II, tenors & basses.

The “moment of truth” has now arrived, for in verse 5 both choirs reproduce their earlier music, no longer alone but instead with choir II entering after a lag of one bar (**Example 3**). This suggests the idea of fugato or, more likely, a canon. But a canon normally involves *single lines* with the *same* music in each line, whereas here we have *4-voice choirs* with noticeably *different* music. If the same music had been written for each choir taking part in the canon, it could not have been made to work because of the multitude of voices – a clashing of the harmonies and melodies could not have been avoided. But Schubert did not intend to write a conventional canon; he gives each choir its own harmonies and melodies with, however, the same rhythms. That might at first seem like a musical concession, but the poetic context was no doubt the real driving force as the two choirs of male warriors are heard to move into battle in *lockstep*, one choir

marching behind the other. The result may, I suggest, be called a “rhythmic canon”.²

Let us now see how Schubert attempted to produce such a form. He had to look ahead to verses 5-6 when introducing its two components separately as verses 1-2 and 3-4; that is why verses 5-6 constitute what I called the “moment of truth”, for it is there that the combination must be shown to work, in that not only are the rhythms the same but the tonal materials are also compatible. Schubert managed to make the combination work, not in a literal-minded manner, but with the aid of small modifications including the insertion of several rests; in particular, verse 6 receives a fresh start, separating it from verse 5.³ The section ends with the earlier conventional cadences, the two choirs now singing together with no lag.

² That term was used much later by the composer Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) for some of his own music, using the term in a very different and more sophisticated way.

³ Schubert’s solution to the difficult problem he had set himself was thus not strict but instead only approximate and involved some artistic license; it could be solved in no other way. Different sung texts in different verses induced small modifications for the sake of natural delivery, somewhat in the manner of a “modified strophic” song. Those modifications, and the inserted rests mentioned, do not essentially change the material of the rhythmic canon itself. Such a solution could not be called neat or intellectually admirable in the Bachian sense; his difficulties here might even be considered to have contributed to his well-known desire to take lessons in counterpoint with Simon Sechter (mentioned later). Incidentally, the inserted rests provide, as a by-product, welcome opportunities for the singers to take a breath in the midst of all their loud bravado singing (attention to breathing is of course not a requirement in some other kinds of canons).

Second presentation: verses 7-12

The essence of the form has now been established. Schubert could have ended the piece at this point, but there was a logical compulsion to continue with the scheme, so as to confirm and complete the presentation in a satisfying way (there was also a logistical compulsion to make extended use of such an uncommon assemblage of performers). He will certainly want to treat the final verses 13 and 14 (the poetically rounding verses) in a special way. He will also have noted early that he could present verses 7-12 as a permuted version of verses 1-6.⁴ Thus each choir could sing what had been the other choir's music – the listener expects it, and that is what Schubert endeavours to provide. For verses 7-12, then, a fresh start is made with the same rhythmic-canonic scheme, but this time with interchanged material. That requires nothing more than an interchange of the choirs' separate presentations for verses 7-8 and 9-10, but for verses 11-12, which constitute a second "moment of truth", it is impossible to maintain the scheme by interchanging their material from verses 5-6, for the harmonies would now clash. To deal with that difficulty, he resorted to writing an exact repeat of the music from verses 5-6 in verses 11-12, without the logically desired interchange (the pattern XYX of the first presentation would preferably have become YXY in the second presentation); after the expectation that had been built up in the preceding verses, 7-10, this lack of fulfilment is disappointing. Thus the clearly intended formal

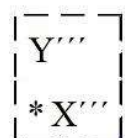
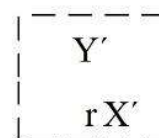
⁴ The special attention that Schubert gave to the start of verse 6 in D443 on account of its sung text – referring to fighting rather than continuing with piety (which attention, incidentally, Schumann also gave in his Op. 62 No. 3) – is thus abandoned now, in the interests of the new and more restrictive formal scheme in which Schubert needs to divide the first 12 verses as 6 + 6 rather than 5 + 7.

scheme for the piece had to fail to this extent, and the conclusion that it was not entirely feasible in the first place cannot be avoided. Either Schubert had not foreseen this problem, or he decided to tolerate it.

Codas: verses 13-14

We have now reached the last two verses of the poem, the “rounding” or “summarising” ones. They are set at new lags. Thus verse 13 uses a lag of not one but two bars; this heroic intention could not be achieved in rhythmic-canonic form with the same material, so the choirs sing their portions *separately* after two bars of rest. The religious thoughtfulness in this verse brings the only appearance of a *p* marking in the piece, and it may come as a welcome relief after the prolonged bravado in *f*. In verse 14 various lags are contrived: first of 1 bar (requiring the choir I material to come first), then 2 bars, then briefly ½ and finally 0 to end the piece with the unison cadences that had been used previously. Such a scheme of varied lags in short portions was a logical way to end although, again, it proved impossible to implement it in a way that could be called neat. Many other small details could be mentioned but the scheme has now been indicated and may be represented as in **Example 4** (see the explanatory Notes below).

Bars	1-	16-	31-	50-	65-	80-	99-	111-121
Verses	1-2	3-4	5-6	7-8	9-10	11-12	13	14
Choir I	X		X'	Y		X'	X''	X'''
Choir II		Y	rY'		X	rY'	rrY''	*Y'''



Example 4: Form of Schubert’s “Schlachtlied” D912.

Notes to Example 4:

1. Schubert has used the poem's verses in pairs, except for the last two single verses.
2. X and Y represent different 4-voice material, shown in **Examples 1 and 2** respectively, sometimes appearing later with inessential modifications indicated with primes as X', X'', X''', Y', Y'', and Y'''.
3. The four completely blank sections indicate a choir's silences.
4. Choir 2 is the contrapuntal follower throughout; it enters after a 1-bar lag (r = 1-bar rest) for verses 5-6 and 11-12, and after a 2-bar rest for verse 13. Various lags, indicated by *, are used for verse 14: first 1 bar, then 2, then ½ and finally 0.
5. The two main presentations are seen in the highlighted long boxes, and to their right the two concluding presentations.
6. The dashed boxes below the main diagram show the interchanges between X and Y that would be logically desirable, but which could not be implemented.

Discussion

Composition: Schubert had written much choral music in his operas, masses and drinking songs, and he had shown a keen interest in regular canonic form as early as 1813;⁵ but nothing had appeared remotely like the present work.⁶ His concept here was to replace the

⁵ Nettheim, N. F. "Schubert's Early Progress: on the Internal Evidence of his Compositions up to *Gretchen am Spinnrade*". PhD thesis, UNSW, 1999. (nettheim.com/publications; a bound volume is held in the Brotherton Library, Leeds and elsewhere).

⁶ It is true that somewhat similar material is found in the opera *Fierabras* D796/3 of 1823 bars 73-80 with two choirs I: SA and II: TB (also celebrating a battle victory). However, that material provides just a brief hint of rhythmic fugato; if other such cases exist, they are not immediately known to me.

tonal basis for a canon with a rhythmic basis, although it turned out that a tonal basis would also be necessary for the second phase as explained above, so the task Schubert undertook could not be achieved in a completely satisfying way. Schubert had intended to take lessons in counterpoint from Simon Sechter (1788-1867); I do not know whether Sechter attended Schubert's public concert but, if he did, it would be interesting to know his reaction to this work. The only contemporary response that I have found is this: "...conceived with truly Germanic power and reflecting the exalted Bard's sublime words".⁷ That appreciation of the somewhat Germanic power is not unexpected in Leipzig or Berlin, but the novelty of the compositional form seems never to have been recognised, let alone evaluated, either contemporaneously or subsequently.

Performance: This is one of the least often performed of all Schubert's works. The texture, which is uniform and dense throughout, is not particularly appealing as abstract music, but one could easily imagine the strength and enthusiasm shown in performance to have been uplifting in the period not long after the 1815 end of the Napoleonic Wars. It was performed again as part of a centenary celebration by the local Philharmonic Society on 26 March 1928.⁸

Several recent recordings exist.⁹ The programme note to the one by "Die Singphoniker" confesses that "the eight-part, double-choir

⁷ Deutsch, O. E. *Schubert: A Documentary Biography*, NY: Da Capo, 1977, p. 756, quoting the *Leipzig Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung*, 7 May 1828.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 754.

⁹ Recordings include (1) Die Singphoniker, CPO, 2000; (2) Arnold Schoenberg Choir, Teldec, 2008; (3) Bayerischen Rundfunk Warner Classics, 2011, "Schubert: Das geistliche & weltliche Chorwerk"; (4) Camerata Musica Limburg, Genuin, 2016.

setting was performed by only five members of the Singphoniker and recorded using multi-track technology”; that method, although enterprising, may not be particularly welcomed by all listeners. In any case, I suspect that the cleverness and novelty shown in Schubert’s construction of the work would be lost on audiences both then and now for, as mentioned above, the form can be *seen* in the score but it is hard to *hear* it in much detail in performance.

Summary: The compositional form of this work, a “rhythmic canon”, is unique in all of music, and clearly suited its context of a war that had recently ended, with the warriors marching in rhythmical lockstep, even if that compositional scheme could not be implemented quite as convincingly as hoped. However, it was not suitable outside its context or as abstract music, and the work has not appealed widely to later listeners. Further, the texture is not attractive other than, again, in its wartime context, and as a result, it has seldom been performed since the 1828 concert and only a few recordings exist. Nevertheless, great admiration must be felt for Schubert’s invention of an ambitious and ingenious new form specially tailored to the purpose in hand.

Nigel Nettheim