

Early German Romanticism and The Wanderer

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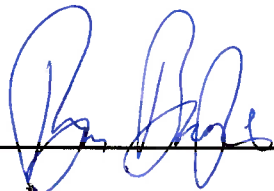
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When discussing Romanticism, one can run into an issue of specificity. Romanticism, as it pertains to music, is more than a single definition. It is a time period, but also a movement. It is a reaction to what came before, yet an appreciation of its predecessors. One might ask, “when did Romantic music start?” and thus open up a multitude of questions regarding style and compositional intent. Would the later compositions of Beethoven be considered romantic? If so, what would that say about the early works of Schubert?

To take a page from philosophy of language, defining music in the Romantic era is an exercise in vagueness. Like a shadow cast upon the ground, the borders of what is considered Romantic and what is not are intangible. One goal of this paper is to recover some of that tangibility. Rather than attempt to discuss all of Romanticism, this paper will focus on a particular theme commonly found within its music. Using this theme as a lens, we will be able to explore multiple facets of Romanticism without getting overwhelmed with details.

The theme that will be used to aid in this exploration is that of *The Wanderer*, specifically the character found in the lied composed by Franz Schubert. As this character is most observable in Germany, The Wanderer will be discussed within their “home country”. We will discuss its German appearance as well as its cultural importance. Through musical and lyrical analysis, we will learn what the Wanderer represents, as well as what they desire. Once we understand what it means to be a Wanderer, we will compare what we have learned to broader scholarly discussions surrounding Romanticism in and outside of Germany. The end goal of this paper is to treat the Wanderer, or wandering, as a microcosm of the larger Romantic movement. In doing so, we can then gain insight into the larger movement, while remaining focused on specific song literature and compositions.

Der Wanderer and Motion

Despite its abundant appearance in German Romanticism, the motif of The Wanderer is much older than that of 19th century composers. The Wanderer in itself is a derivative of the hero's journey. This literary device is most often associated with the works of Homer, but is found throughout a multitude of stories and epics. As an interpretation of this journey, the similarities between The Wanderer and the hero's journey are not lacking. Both motifs/devices rely on motion as their primary source of change. In order for the Odyssey to take place Odysseus must leave Ithaca. Don Quixote's quest would have been truly unachievable had he stayed in one place. Werther would have never met Charlotte had he not first left his village. Granted, in that last example, Werther may have been better off staying home.

These are not unsurprising examples, yet they are important to keep in mind as one discusses the motif of The Wanderer. Motion, movement, or wandering, as it appears in this context, is synonymous with change or "becoming"¹. Author Theodore Gish states that this wandering, or becoming, demonstrates the potential within the protagonist to realize their desires. It is "a personification of his yearning."² This brings us to one of the more tragic differences between The Wanderer and the aforementioned hero's journey: The Wanderer may not be able to realize their potential, or what is yearned for. As we will soon see, a specific difference between the Wanderer and the Hero's journey lies in the purpose of this motion. A Journey requires motion to start, whereas a Wanderer travels in response to an event. In other words: "something happened to me/my homeland, so I'm gonna go wander about it." We will soon see, however, that much of this wandering is in vain.

¹ Theodore Gish, "Wanderlust" and "Wanderleid": The Motif of the Wandering Hero in German Romanticism" *Studies in Romanticism* 3 No. 4 (Summer 1964): 226

² Gish, "Wanderlust" and "Wanderleid" 226

Der Wanderer und der Lieder

Perhaps the most efficient way to begin would be to analyze the source itself. Schubert composed several pieces following the theme of the Wanderer, such as *Der Wanderer an den Mond* (The Wanderer and the Moon), *Wanderer Fantasy*, and *Der Wanderer* (Lied). I will begin by discussing and analyzing the Lied, as I believe it captures much of the themes that will be relevant in later discussions. To ensure clarity, any subsequent discussion mentioning *Der Wanderer* will refer to the Lied D. 489, unless otherwise stated. The analysis will consist of both harmonic, or instrumental themes in tandem with their corresponding lyrics. A diagram of the structure of D.489 is as follows: (i) , A, B^w , C^a , A , D.³

This piece begins by setting the scene. The piano plays a triplet rhythm in the right hand, with a steady, if not staggering rhythm in the left hand. There are six measures of establishing content, in which the mood of the piece is set. These six bars serve to create tension, which is achieved through conventional dissonances. What I consider to be more important regarding these introductory measures is what the left hand is playing. As mentioned, the rhythm of the left hand is somewhat staggered. Each downbeat is accented with a heavy low C#, followed by a note from the corresponding chord on beats three and four. This rhythm invokes slow, heavy footsteps. The piano, at this moment, is the Wanderer. It staggers upward, weighed down, yet moving. The accompanying right hand harmony, making use of minor second dissonance and diminished chords, tells us that our Wanderer is pained, yet there is a determination in their footsteps. One can picture our protagonist making their way up a lonely trail, feet dragging. Perhaps they come across a traveler, or in need of a rest, they pause, and speak:

Ich komme vom Gebirge her,

I come from the mountains here,

³ (i): Intro, "A" section, "B" section (wandering theme), "C" section (aria), D section (conclusion, the answer).

This is a transitory moment. No longer is the piano our Wanderer, we see the Wanderer themselves. The ambling footsteps of the left hand continue, yet take a backseat to our narrator. The Wanderer picks up where the introduction left off, setting the scene of where they currently stand. “Es dampft das Thal, es braust das Meer.” The valley is foggy, the sea, it roars. The phrase, “es braust das Meer” is sung twice, a slight deviation from the original poem. This repetition invokes the waves of the ocean, ever repeating. This can be further emphasized by a singer's pronunciation of the word “braust”, in which the flipped “r” sound is extended in duration, simulating the roar itself.

Once the setting is established, we as audience members receive a glimpse of what this piece is about, and how it will most likely end tragically. This section, which I will now refer to as the Wandering Section, establishes a musical theme with the phrase “Ich wandle still, bin wenig froh” (I wander, silent and joyless).⁴ The melody of this phrase is repeated in the left hand, and in itself somewhat wanders. The contour rises and falls, remaining diatonic and sounding relatively hopeful, a stark contrast to what is to come next.

This section translates as: “I walk silently, without joy, and my sighs ask where, always where?” It is obvious that our narrator is wandering, if not from the title alone, yet where the tragedy becomes apparent is in the phrase “immer wo?” (always where?). They are not only wandering, but searching, and this search will never end. Importantly, it is not the Wanderer who asks where, but the sighs themselves. Our Wanderer has been searching for so long that even their sighs, their breath, has grown weary. The personification of the breath tells us that the narrator has been alone for quite some time. Perhaps, in order to provide some semblance of companionship, the Wanderer gives a voice to their own exhalations. Another, albeit darker possibility is that the very thing that carries one's words, the breath that one uses to speak, is no longer theirs. The Wanderer feels as though their own voice is no longer part of them. In this case the narrator is in fact asking “always where”, yet they do not feel as though, or cannot

⁴ Richard Wigmore, “Der Wanderer (1816)” Oxford Lieder, 2023. <https://www.oxfordlieder.co.uk/song/1542>

recognize, that they are the one asking this question. I'm inclined to believe that the second interpretation is more appropriate. During the repeat of "immer wo", the melody rises and falls by a half step, a pained movement that mirrors this yearning sentiment.⁵

After this pained question, the narrator continues onward with their lamentation: "The sun is so cold to me here, the flowers wilt and life is old, and men's voices (a) mere hollow sound. I am a stranger everywhere."⁶ This lamentation is underscored with a shift in accompaniment. Where the Wandering Section had its own melodic theme, this section of the work is more akin to a recit. The accompaniment heavily favors the downbeat of each measure, with a mild rhythmic continuation of the staggered, footstep-like pattern discussed in the introduction. As a recit in an opera serves to provide exposition, so too does this moment within the song.

From the lyrics we learn that our Wanderer is painfully aware of the hopelessness of their situation. This is apparent with the first phrase, where it is stated that they feel no warmth from the sun. It is not stated whether the sun is obscured, or not shining at all, and as such there is some room for interpretation within this sentence. The sun could be hidden away behind the clouds, or perhaps the sun is shining. Yet despite the presence of the sun the Wanderer feels no warmth. What voices they do hear are hollow, or without meaning. The Wanderer not only feels alone, but feels like a stranger. A stranger not only to this land, but everywhere. This moment serves as some foreshadowing, reinforcing the hopelessness of their situation. If the Wanderer had somewhere to return to, yes they would be a stranger, but not a stranger everywhere. This implies that the Wanderer has no where to return to. Even if they could return, they would still feel like a stranger. Whatever connection they had to their own land has disappeared.

We as listeners get a slight reprieve from the depressing nature of this song in the following section, which can be characterized as reminiscent. Again the question is asked:

⁵ It is worth noting that depending on which score one possesses, the notation will indicate either an appoggiatura or an increase in melody by half step. Despite this, the appoggiatura is rarely performed.

⁶ Wigmore, "Der Wanderer (1816)" Oxford Lieder, 2023

“where, where is my beloved land?” yet this time with rhythmically upbeat and consonant underscoring. This section is followed by a change in time signature. The rhythm proceeds in 6/8, with the melody emphasizing the upbeat of each measure in a dance-like fashion. This change in mood is accompanied by equally exuberant lyricism:

Das land, das land, so hoffnungsgrün.	The land so green with hope,
Das Land, wo meine Rosen blühen,	the land where my roses bloom,
Wo meine Freunde wandeln gehn,	Where my friends walk,
Wo meine Toten auferstehn,	where my dead ones rise again,
Das Land, das meine Sprache spricht,	the land that speaks my tongue,
O Land, wo bist du?	O land, where are you?

These joyful descriptions of the land that our Wanderer searches for are perhaps too much for our Wanderer to handle. They begin with describing the land itself: green, where their roses bloom, etc... Yet as the melody rises, almost to a shout, the Wanderer can't help but call out for their friends. They yearn for the land that speaks their own tongue, where their dead can rise again. As this joyful yearning turns to sorrow, they realize again the uselessness of their words, and break. This reminiscing is cut to a halt with again the question, “Oh land, where are you?”

We return to the Wandering Section, an exact repeat of the section following the introduction. Our Wanderer was free for just a moment, only to return to their search, wandering silent and joyless, their sighs still asking where. This question of where is finally answered in the last section of this piece:

Im Geisterhauch tönt's mir zurück: „Dort, wo du nicht bist, dort ist das Glück!“	In a ghostly whisper the answer comes: “There, where you are not, is happiness!”
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I believe it is safe to say that we as listeners would be hard pressed to find a stronger example of the tragedy of this piece than what is delivered to us in this final moment. We had

already learned that our Wanderer felt as though they didn't belong anywhere, yet when we learned that there may still have been hope of finding some peace.

Now we know the severity of the situation. Our Wanderer is told, or realizes, that the happiness they seek will forever be out of reach. This realization reads almost like a riddle, as where one is not is everywhere. One aspect we still have to ponder is why they can't return, why would it be impossible for our Wanderer to feel out of place? In finding out why, what insights would that provide us as to what wandering represents, and how it relates to German Romanticism? We are provided some direct answers from the lyrics of this song itself: Our Wanderer longs for what one can assume to be their homeland, a place where their friends are, that is green with hope, and where their dead walk again. This land that they seek has undergone a drastic change. I'm reminded of what happened to the city of Carthage: an entire civilization wiped out, salt sewn into the earth so that no crop could ever return. It seems to me that a similar event happened to our Wanderer, and I'd support this claim with the line in which the Wanderer calls out for the land that speaks their language. Not only are their friends or loved ones gone, but their culture has disappeared.

Having taken some time to analyze this song, I had yet to address a nagging question. That being if so much of these thematic elements are derived from the lyrics of this piece, what use is it to set the words to music? In other words, why not just read the original work? D. 489 was composed by Schubert, however its lyrics come from a poem written by George Philipp Schmidt von Lübeck. The poem, of the same name, was written in 1815, one year before Schubert set it to song. I think the best way to begin answering this question is with another question: why would Schubert set this poem to music in the first place? The answer to this secondary question can be found in researching Schubert's preferred poems to set. Musicologist and author Kenneth S. Whitton states that Schubert was drawn to poems in which the words already contained a semblance of musicality. "Like Goethe, he (Schubert) sensed the musicality

of words, whether they were, to use *Thrasylbulos Georgiades's* word, *Musikabel*.”⁷ From this information we can assume that Schubert thought Schmidt's poem was already musical, and thus sought to enhance this musicality with his own setting. I am of the opinion that Schubert's setting of this poem is more effective at conveying the mood of the original piece.

Where Schmidt's poem tells a story, Schubert's Lied is more of an event. Before the words even appear, we as listeners are transported to a lugubrious setting. The sparse harmony of the intro section slowly increases in tension, harmony and melody rising, with that aforementioned staggering rhythm. We know that something is coming, and that something isn't good. The poem on its own does not have the luxury of instantly setting the mood. In addition, a recurring theme of Romantic music was the public expression of the private. A poem can be read alone, whereas D.489 is intended for an audience. We'll return to this concept in a moment, but I'll conclude this section by stating that D. 489 is more accessible, and more effective, than its literary counterpart.

Stepping back for a moment, I believe it would be appropriate to contextualize this work within a larger framework of German Romanticism. We know that our Wanderer has experienced some form of change, and that in response to this change they desire for things to return to the way they were. This desire for a return of one's culture can be described as nationalistic, a term that is not foreign to Romanticism. To borrow a phrase from musicologist Richard Taruskin, Romanticism is the juxtaposition of Truth against Truth, which he explains to be the Individual against the Universal. This idea stems from a response to Enlightenment ideals of morality and objectivity.

Ideals such as correctness or specificity were shunned by Romantics in favor of sincerity and authenticity. Our Wanderer in this case is searching for their authentic, or true, homeland. This is nationalistic, yet is important to be specific about what this term means. It would be of little use to us to say that nationalism is overwhelming pride for one's nation. Within the context

⁷ Kenneth, Whitton, *Goethe and Schubert* (Portland: Amadeus Press, 1999) 88.

of Romanticism, musical nationalism is treated more as a “collective consciousness” rather than blind pride. Collective consciousness, in this context, refers to the perceived mood or mindset of a large group of people. It is similar to a political or cultural barometer. Taruskin explains this collective consciousness as an imagined community. That is to say those who felt this nationalistic pride may have felt as such in part due to nostalgia.

We can see this nostalgia within the work of D. 489 itself, with the antepenultimate section being entirely dedicated towards romanticizing the land they have lost. With that being said, I think it’s important to take into consideration who’s perspective we are being told. D. 489 is not some hyper nationalistic anthem, nor is it a work that would be sung by a crowd to instill a prideful fervor. It is a solitary piece, an account told by one individual as they stand entirely alone. This in itself is another Romantic ideal, which would be that of the individual. Taruskin characterizes this ideal as “publicly expressed private art”. Essentially, a work that is meant to tell a deeply personal story to a larger audience. This in turn is contradictory to the previously discussed notion of nationalism, which itself is rather opposed to individuality. Taruskin does not shy away from this contradiction. He explains that the two are related, with Romantic Nationalism referring to “We”, which is an expansion of Romantic individualism, or “I”. D.489 is written from the “I” perspective for the “We” perspective. It is a personal story that would resonate with those entranced with the idea of Romantic Nationalism.

This is in part why I chose to discuss Romanticism through the lens of the Wanderer, because in seeking to understand why this Wanderer is in fact wandering, we can gain insight as to what was considered important, or what would resonate, with Romantic listeners. So what does the Wanderer represent? In this case, they represent a hopeless longing, a desire to return to a place that can no longer exist. They are an embodiment of nostalgia, of mourning, of love, and they are restless. There is a level of exploration within this concept as well, though it is important to make a distinction between wandering and exploring, as each has different goals. Exploration within the context of wandering can be literal, physically moving from one place to

another, but it is also emotional. The notion of inwardness is central to our Wanderer. German poetry and literature, and subsequently music, sought to induce reverie in its audience. So much so that this inwardness, or *innerlichkeit*,⁸ could not simply remain as literature. When words themselves could not accurately represent the exploration of deep emotions, Romanticism had to turn to song. We've already discussed how Schubert in particular would select literature to set based on the inherent musicality of the words. Schubert's setting would seek to transcend both written language and instrumentation through the combination of the two.

This intentionality is important, because as Taruskin observes, one characteristic of Romanticism is the importance of audience interpretation. This again returns to the idea of the individual, and the composer's public yet private art. In order for the composer to leave room for the individual, the thematic resonance of the music must be in part subjective to the listener. Taruskin argues that while the composer has an influence over how the mood of a piece is set, the final interpretation must be in the hands of individual audience members.⁹ Themes of individualism are not only to be represented in music and received by an audience, but are of equal importance to Romantic composers.

In comparison to their 18th century predecessors, this is a new concept. It is a subject discussed at length by musicologist Alfred Einstein. In his book: *Music in the Romantic Era*, he states that much of the music composed in the 18th century was done at the behest of the Church, or other fiduciary establishments. Patrons, cities, and aristocrats all had a say in a composer's final output, and as such, free music was not written.¹⁰ By contrast, romantic composers were proud of their isolation.¹¹ They were less likely to have a particular goal in mind when creating compositions, leaving the final interpretation of their work in the hands of the listener. This was in part due to a rejection of tradition, which was in turn a tenet of Romanticism.

⁸ Richard Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music*, (Oxford University Press, July 27th, 2009), 63.

⁹ Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music*, 68.

¹⁰ Alfred Einstein, *Music In The Romantic Era*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1947) 10.

¹¹ Einstein, *Music In The Romantic Era*, 16.

With this context established, we can see that the Wanderer is in part a representation of this isolation. Though there is some contradiction taking place. For example, how should one reconcile this isolationist, anti traditional sentiment with the strong themes of Romantic nationalism found within this work? Our Wanderer is more alone than they've ever been, longing to return to a place that no longer exists. This appears to be traditionalist, as a desire for their land and or culture to remain unchanged. The root of this problem lies in my own characterization of Romantic composers as anti-traditionalist. A more nuanced position would be to say that Romanticism had a subjective relationship with its predecessors. Berlioz may reject 18th century composers, while Schumann would be more inclined to appreciate their work.

Reconciliation and the Audience

In researching this subject, one word that constantly makes an appearance is “contradictory”. A specific contradiction that I find compelling has again to do with the notion of nationalism. As a student attempting to deepen my understanding of Romanticism, these opposing sides are frustrating. I believe the answer to my frustration lies in getting comfortable with the contradictions. We see these contradictions even within our lens of the Wanderer. This character represents loss, loneliness, an endless search for something that can never be found. But through the audience, they represent camaraderie through shared emotion. The excitement of exploration, the love for one's homeland. The Wanderer provides the opportunity to take such private emotion and share it, to say that as insular as these feelings may be, they are not meant to be carried alone. Thus our Wanderer is a literal representation of Taruskin's publicly expressed private art. The Wanderer themselves is alone, yet they are not meant to be experienced alone. This character represents only a sliver of the Romantic movement, yet it speaks to the movement as a whole. One cannot discuss Romanticism without running into contradictions: what is Traditional versus what is New, the Personal and the Public, the National and the Exploratory. These contradictions are inherently human, irreconcilable, and as such

Romantic. From my analysis, the themes of Schubert's *Der Wanderer* explore their own "contradiction". This song is an exploration of the physical, wandering or searching, and an inward exploration. It is both looking outward and inward. In the end, it seems our Wanderer was able to reconcile these two ideas. They realize that they will never find the land and people they seek, but in doing so find some comfort in that certainty. We as audience members can hear this acceptance, and as such feel this reconciliation.

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