

Megan Reich
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Cohesion Through Paradox: Schubert's "Am Meer" and *Moments musicaux* no. 2

Song: Schubert, *Schwanengesang*, D. 957, no. 12 "Am Meer"

Schubert's "Am Meer" ("By the Sea"), the twelfth song of his posthumously published *Schwanengesang* collection, suspends the listener in a tension of unresolved ambiguity. In this poem by Heinrich Heine, a man sits alone with his lover along a seashore, watching a peaceful sunset. Suddenly, a storm surges through the scene. Tears fall from the eyes of the man's beloved; he drinks them as they land in her white hands. Since that night his body and soul have been consumed with yearning. The man only realizes only now that this woman has poisoned him with her tears. Schubert's setting of this poem takes the listener along the emotional journey of the narrator, moving them from states of naïve trust, terrified shock, rejection of reality, and finally to grim acceptance. Through melodically and harmonically alternating between sections of stable predictability and instable uncertainty, and motivically recalling what has already been heard, Schubert's "Am Meer" musically embodies the experience of betrayal as a paradox between the unexpected and inevitable.

Schubert subverts harmonic expectations from the beginning of the work, making the listener uneasy towards the situation to come. The piano plays a German augmented sixth chord, its dissonant quality highlighted by its constrained intervallic space in the lower register of the piano. An augmented sixth chord conventionally serves a predominant function, but Schubert unexpectedly resolves the chord to a tonic C major chord rather than at the dominant. Yet at the same time, the smooth step-wise voice-leading and the common tone of C between the two half-note chords, emphasized by three open-octave whole note C's, make the resolution sound effortless and almost inevitable. The chord and its resolution repeat as if an echo, the first of several recollections that will gain in significance throughout the work.

Heinrich Schenker has described the repetition of this opening chord at such a slow tempo as if one was "staring" at the note, in so doing transported "to the side of the unhappy lover" (Kerman 48). Rather than holding one note through two bars, Schenker suggests that the spaced repetition of the uneasy chord progression places the listener into the uneasy perspective of the narrator, even before the voice has entered. The second of these introductory chords

pauses at a fermata, suspending the listener in a moment of unsettled resolution, exacerbated by the fact that Schubert has not given any sense of meter or definite key. As Kerman describes in his essay “A Romantic Detail in Schubert’s *Schwanengesang*,” Schubert uses repeated auxiliary progressions in the piano as introductions for several of his songs. What is unusual about “Am Meer,” however, is that while the introduction does half-heartedly establish a tonic, it fails to “signal to a later event or anticipate a figuration of the melody” (Kerman 52). In this way Kerman suggests the introduction is “nonfunctional” from a “Classical point of view.” But from “Romantic point of view,” the introduction for Kerman succeeds in capturing the “enigmatic solemnity” conveyed by the text (Kerman 52). However, it can be argued that Schubert does use the introductory motif as both a poetic and formal device through its recurrence not only in the postlude but subtly reworked in other areas of the piece. As will shortly be shown, the opening later becomes a unifying device that causes the listener to remember the initial uncertainty in moments of the song that appeared otherwise resolved.

Schubert immediately dissolves the uncertainty of the introduction, however, with the onset of the first verse (A section). Throughout this section the left hand of the piano sounds a continuous pedal point of C’s and G’s. The harmony remains in the bucolic C major for 11 mm., never straying from simple tonic and dominant chords. This harmonic stability reflects the simple beauty (the sparkling sea, the glow of the evening) described in the text. This sense of certainty is reinforced by the simple four-bar phrasing of the A section, forming a parallel period that ends with a half-cadence in measure 6, gently ornamented by the vocal line. The A section achieves full closure with an authentic V^7-I cadence in mm. 10-11 that is extended a measure with another echoing chord by the piano.

It is here where Schubert’s second main tactic for evoking betrayal – recollection - comes in. The way that this closing chord is played twice sequentially, and in a similar half-note rhythm, recalls the dissonant introductory chords. The voice-leading from chord to chord is also almost the same, but reflected: the notes in the left hand of the piano move upwards instead of down, and the right hand move down by step instead of up. Additionally, while the voice lands on the root of the chord with the first progression to make a perfect authentic cadence (m. 10), in m 11 the top voice of the piano remains on the third, unlike the introduction, where an extra C is added in the top voice of the piano (m. 2). Thus, instead of directly imitating the introductory motif, Schubert merely recalls it. The listener remembers that maybe something is amiss, as he or

she may have gathered from the slightly ominous description of the “lonely fisherman’s hut” and the “silent and alone” scene, but the music is not quite ready to admit to the inevitable betrayal to become.

This all changes with the onset of the second verse (B section), where Schubert moves from clarity back to ambiguity. The transition to the B section marks the first of several alternations between certainty and uncertainty (A sections and B sections) throughout “Am Meer,” highlighting the juxtaposition of trust and distrust that occurs on either side of the moment of betrayal. The result is a partly strophic ABA’B’ form, with the third and fourth verses parallel to the first and third and capped on both ends by the introductory progression. Like Schubert’s movement from the introduction to the first verse, the transition into the second verse is marked with uncertainty and tension. Piano tremolos on a C minor chord abruptly enter, musically illustrating the thunder and rain of the coastal storm soon to be described by the text. The tempo speeds and the atmosphere gets progressively sinister as the voice joins. In the first verse, the entrance of the voice served to clarify the harmonic ambiguity of the introduction, but in the second verse, the voice triggers a cascade of unstable chromaticism and modulations. In m. 15, the tonality suddenly turns to D minor. The harmonic rhythm in the tremolos of the piano speeds; changing chords once every measure in mm. 12-14 to twice per measure in m. 15 and to every quarter notes by measure 16, at the highest point of the melody in the voice (an F).

The vocal melody, rather than moving in a contour of mostly diatonic steps and thirds as in the first verse, is now markedly disjunct, capturing the violence of the scene set by the text. The vocalist, for example, leaps up a perfect fifth as he sings “the fog rose” (m. 13), and jumps down an octave with the “back and forth” motion of the gull. The scene calms, however, as the narrator brings his attention back to his lover in the second phrase of the verse. The harmony emerges back to C major (m. 18) as he watches tears drop from her eyes, just as the rain falls from the sky. In m. 21, Schubert inserts accents in the voice and piano the moment the text states, “her tears dropped,” and each part descends a whole step, akin to the sobbing sound one would make while crying. Additionally, unlike the purely tonic-dominant harmony of the previous two measures (mm. 19-20), Schubert twice repeats a ii⁶ sonority precluded by a dissonant suspension. This echoed resolution of dissonance again recalls the introductory motif, reminding the listener to proceed with caution. Through these devices, Schubert conveys to the listener the significance of the lover’s tears – and indeed, we soon find they are the source of the

betrayal. The second verse finishes in mm. 22-23 with the same two echoed resolutions, but this time ending inconclusively on a half cadence. Furthermore, the insertion of an Eb chromatic passing tone between the two chords underlines a minor sonority suggestive of a darker mood.

As Schubert moves into the third verse (the second A section), this sense of uncertainty is quickly disregarded. By returning to the same rendition of the simple C major harmony and predictable phrasing as the first verse, Schubert creates a new tension between the music and the text. As a listener we recall the initial tranquil scene of the narrator and his lover at the seashore, but instead, we receive the somewhat more unsettling account of the narrator drinking away the tears that have fallen in his lover's hand, subtly emphasized with added accents in the piano (mm. 26, 30-32). Schubert conveys a merging of the idealized past (the tranquil love before the storm) with the tarnished present (the storm, a decaying love).

A similar parallelism takes place between the second and fourth verses, with the narrator's the initial shock of the storm transferring to the shock of the narrator's realization of what the woman's tears have done to him. Again, the harmonic journey mirrors the protagonist's journey. This time, however, the text provides added significance, with the innocent serenity of C major consumed and subverted by darkening modulations just as the protagonist has been poisoned by drinking the tears of his own lover. Slight changes in the melodic contour and rhythm emphasize the narrator's agitation, such as a new dissonant upper-neighbor note in m. 35. The use of straight quarter notes in m. 37 instead of the dotted rhythm in the parallel m. 16 put heavy declamation on the words "my soul is dying with."

In the final phrase, we finally learn what the now apparently "wretched" woman has done: poisoned the narrator with her tears (mm. 42-43). These two measures correspond to mm. 21, the aforementioned disguised introductory motive. With the nexus of these three elements: the uncertain introductory progression, m. 21 (tears dropping like the rain), and m. 42 (tears as poison), Schubert reveals the disturbing image that is central to Heine's poem: that the narrator's lover is only the storm that surrounds him. Richard Kramer observes that as the narrator poisons himself from a love that never existed, the "literal act strains the conventional metaphor," and love ultimately becomes a "synonym for spiritual and physical decay and dying" (Kramer 214).

The narrator comes to terms with this now inevitable betrayal and death. Unlike the half cadence of m. 22, full resolution is achieved with a I^{6/4}-V-I progression in m. 43 and conclusively stressed by the added ornamentation in the vocal line. However, Schubert switches

from stability to ambiguity one last time by inserting a short postlude that contains the same two Ger⁺⁶-I progressions that opened the song. By ending the piece with the uncertainty of where it began, Schubert encourages the listener to stand back and look in uncertain retrospect at the song as a whole. What was gained by the narrator's realization of betrayal? Was the protagonist's lover ever actually there to begin with, or was the narrator alone all along, drinking the downpour of the coastal storm? Despite the fact that from harmonic standpoint the song is self-contained and resolved, the recollection of what once was leaves the listener with more questions than answers.

Piano work: Schubert, *Moments musicaux*, Op. 94 (D. 780), no. 2 Andantino

In both "Am Meer" and the "Andantino," Schubert achieves musical coherence through holding two apparent opposites in close proximity to each other through a unifying device. In "Am Meer," this was the alternation of sections of clarity and uncertainty, linked through transitions that echoed the Ger⁺⁶-I chord of the song's opening. Here in the "Andantino," it is the simultaneous evocation of both motion and stasis. John Rothgeb notices this paradox between motion and stasis throughout *Moments Musicaux* as a whole, describing Schubert's work as "an advancement of content with reference to a past event." (Rothgeb 187). Schubert's use of textural, dynamic, and harmonic contrast within the larger form creates a sense of forward direction, but underneath he employs a consistent melodic contour and a sense of pedal point beneath the activity that makes this piece at once settled and unsettled. The overall form of the "Andantino," ABA'B'A", could be considered a five-part variation-rondo, with modified versions of an A theme a self-contained refrain in the tonic key of Ab major separated by two contrasting B sections in F# minor. The piece keeps coming back to the theme of the A section like the repeated return to the echoing half-note resolutions in "Am Meer." By varying the sections slightly with each return, however, the listener ultimately experiences not continual points of recollection but a sense of larger trajectory.

The main theme of the A section consists of a repeated dotted rhythm in 9/8 time, consisting of an Ab triad moving between neighbor tones in a back-and-forth lullaby-like motion. After four measures of simple dominant-tonic harmony the half-note authentic cadence, the dotted rhythm motive swerves down a step to outline a dominant Eb triad. Now, Schubert hints at a minor tonality by moving back and forth to a Cb neighbor tone. (This Cb pitch turns

out to later be significant, foreshadowing the B minor tonality stressed in coming B section). The listener receives behind the same basic melodic contour of the two phrases (“a” and “b,” see diagram) a paradox of two different harmonic messages. Schubert repeats these a and b phrases once more, but this time, as René Rusch observes, “disrupts the symmetrical balance between the antecedent phrases” by modulating to Db major, the subdominant, in m. 15. The A section closes with an authentic cadence in this new key. Within the A section itself we have an unexpected, progressive harmonic movement that leads away from the starting place of Ab without returning to it, but at the same time, the repetitive dotted rhythm has never changed. The listener effectively travels while staying in the same place.

Like in transition to the B sections in “Am Meer,” Schubert surprises the listener with a sudden shift to F# minor. This transition is prepared, however, through openly ending the A section in Db major – also the dominant of Gb, or F# minor. This allows the Db in the top voice of the end of the A section (m. 17) to also serve as the first note - C# - of the B section. In their Schenkerian analysis of the piece, Allen Cadwallader and David Gagné view the two keys of Ab major and F# minor as an enharmonic major second (I-bVII), thus representing a motivic expansion of the upper neighbor-tone motion of the ‘a’ theme (what they consider the *Urlinie*) (Cadwallader and Gagné 288-9). Frisk also suggests that Schubert foreshadows F# minor through the use of Gb as the melodic high point in mm. 7-8 (Frisk 11). Indeed, at the surface, the B section (beginning m. 18) appears to be the stylistic opposite of the A section. However, as Cadwallader and Gagné note with his choice of keys, Schubert carries over several subtle but key features that reconcile these two sections with one another. In the left hand, for example, the smooth stepwise chords of section A are replaced by wide-leaping arpeggios. Now in F# minor, the harmony suggests a mood of passionate anger rather than gentle tranquility. However, Schubert marks m. 18 with a pianissimo – one dynamic level *softer* than the piano opening of the work. While movement has been achieved harmonically, the dynamics seem to suggest an opposite retreat into stasis.

This same interplay between motion and stasis can be observed in the melodic contour of the B section. In terms of motion, the intervals of the B section’s melody expand beyond the oscillating major and minor seconds of the opening, reaching to an E in m. 20 and an F in m. 22. Even so, the tonic pedal point in the bass voice in mm. 18-21 recalls the constant repetition of the tonic Ab chord in nearly every measure of the A section. Additionally, the B section melody

regularly returns to the note C#, in spite of the surrounding changes in harmony. Just as the dotted eighth motive of the 'a' theme is played at least twice before affirming the cadence of each phrase in the A section, at m. 18 a dotted quarter C# in the right hand is played 3 times, as if the pianist must insist against each note in order to move forward. Moreover, the right hand melody in measures 20 and 23 outlines a scale with a C arrival point in the next measure. Importantly, this C# is the same pitch as the Db upper-neighbor of the opening theme. Frisk, too, notes how "one can hear the entire section as generated through the upper neighbor, Db, of the A section's primary melodic tone, C" (Frisk 8). Schubert also evokes characteristics of the A theme in the B section through subtle harmonic connections. In m. 19, a B minor (iv^{6/4}) sonority acknowledges the Cb neighbor tone from the opening motive. Hints of the same 'B' pitch reappear in mm. 27-28, when Schubert tonicizes iv (B minor).

A brief retransition in mm. 32-35 leads into a modified second occurrence of the A section in m. 36. Again, one harmony seems to merge into the other, with a VI (D#) tonality simultaneously functioning as V of Ab. The second A section, however, deviates from mm. 1-17 in ways that both unifies it with previous sections and projects a further sense of direction and motion. The abab' form transforms into an ab''a' form where the b'' section, instead of repeating the minor version of the dotted motive, veers into Cb major (m. 42) and develops a new eighth-note triplet idea that recalls the left-hand arpeggiation and melodic contour from mm. 23 and 30 of the B section. Furthermore, the Cb pitch links to Schubert's emphasis on iv (B) in the B section and the neighbor tone of the 'a' theme. Thus, Schubert simultaneously explores new territory while also recalling what has been previously heard. The second A section also differs from the first in that it ends conclusively, with a prolonged dominant Eb pedal beginning with the a' phrase in m. 48 and a repetition of the dotted motive leading to a full Ab chord in m. 55. The coda-like dominant pedal makes it seem as if the piece could end here – but Schubert suddenly launches into a variation of the B section that contains more motion than before.

The basic melody, harmony, and phrasing of this second B section is the same as the first. However, Schubert heightens the intensity by adding octaves to the right hand and marking the section as forte rather than pianissimo. The stabilizing effect of the recurring C# is also disrupted. In the right hand of m. 56, A's and F#'s surround a gap where the C once was, and the pedal point transfers from arpeggios of the left hand to the more unstable sonorities in the right

hand. This is the furthest Schubert strays from the lullaby of the opening, and marks the climax of the movement. Nevertheless, Schubert still achieves what Rusch describes as a “coherence between seemingly disparate musical events by means of motivic unity” (Rusch 60). But the connection is more than a motivic one. While the return to the B section in 56 is sudden and dramatic in terms of harmony and dynamics, the notes in the right hand simply moves up by half or whole step to maintain the same 3-part voicing as the I and V chords repeated throughout the previous A section. By keeping certain textural elements consistent between the contrasting section, Schubert once again juxtaposes change with stasis.

For the most part, the retransition in mm. 70-73 mirrors mm. 32-35, but in mm. 67-69 Schubert switches into the mode of F# major. Fisk interprets this recollection of the major mode (i.e., of the A sections) as a type of “inner reconciliation between past and present experience” (Fisk 11). As we move forward, we move back. In a similar vein, the final occurrence of the A section at m. 74 fulfills the function of reasserting a return to Ab major out of the tumult from the B section before it. It shares the same ab”a’ form as the second A section, but in the b” section it remains firmly in the key of Ab, ending in measure 82 with an authentic cadence. The before, the final a’ phrase serves as a coda that repeats the V⁽⁷⁾-I cadence each measure, concluding on a I chord in m. 90 that utilizes the same voicing as in m. 55. As in “Am Meer,” resolution has from a technical standpoint been fully achieved, but for the listener lingering doubt may remain from the memory of Schubert’s unexpected shifts to the minor B section. The paradox created between the motion of harmonic departure and return, and the stasis of continuous sound in the texture, melody, and transitions through every section encapsulates Schubert’s request that this movement be played in a “fervent” and “heartfelt” style. It is as if the agitated emotion of the B sections represents a voice yearning to be expressed, but constantly quelled by the return to the A lullaby. Schubert ends with a fitful surrender unto sleep.

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