

9. THE ROMANTIC GERMAN LIED – AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract: *The lied represents a fundamental form of expression of the cantability and of the relation of the melody with the poetic. And, although the model of the cultural lied could still be heard in the music of the 18th century in the compositions of the Viennese classical school - in Haydn folk songs and, especially, in forms somewhat akin to the aria of Mozart or Beethoven – the landmarks of this genre were established precisely by the romantics of the 19th century, representatives in most of the German school. Schubert, Schumann, Franz, Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, Wagner, Brahms, Wolf etc. transformed the song into a cultural art form, incorporating images of popular origin into literary-musical structures for voice and piano making use of technical possibilities and expressiveness specific to romanticism.*

Key words: *lied, Romanticism, cultural art form, vocal art*

1. Introduction

The artistic movement of the 19th century introduced in the universal cultural circuit new musical concepts found in total opposition with those from the era of classicism. Romantic composers went beyond the classical conventional and supported the expression of feelings, freedom of expression, the manifestation of fantasy, and in another order of ideas - the spontaneity of music. Emotional intensity, the importance given to folklore, the freedom of musical forms, the unification of music with literature, the exploitation of dissonances, harmonies and modulations in distant tones are the main elements that constitute the general characteristics of romanticism. “The thematic contrast, the asymmetry of the phrases and the accessibility will constitute other peculiarities, generating defining features of the musical language, together with the use of folklore and program music, together becoming the composition principles of the 19th century. These elements determined the appearance of specific genres: the lied, the instrumental miniature, the symphonic poem, the symphony with program, and the opera will reach the apogee of evolution”⁶⁸.

2. Discussions

The large number of lieds was possible in part due to the favorable artistic environment, and most of all, the concepts of the writers and philosophers of those times. The main sources of inspiration for the composers were the texts signed by Goethe, Heine or Schiller, whose importance did not remain in history a purely literary one, as they led the lyric genre to a diversity of levels that denote emotions as innate as possible to human nature. Then, by adding a dramatic dimension, the poets focused their attention on man and on the whole set of his feelings, manifested in relation to nature and society. In fact, most of the many such texts have appeared and spread in German-speaking societies, on the one hand due to

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⁶⁸ http://www.unmb.ro/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/gr.I_Andrada-Augustin_SCHUMANN.pdf

the possibility of immediate publication in cultural journals and almanacs, and on the other hand thanks to intellectual abilities of the German social classes to perceive verses that artistically represent life with its various aspects as adequately as possible.

In direct contact with the musical art, the texts of the romantic lied extended to the area of large vocal-instrumental genres, such as cantata, oratorio or opera, from which certain details of dramaturgy were borrowed, ingeniously superimposed over the national specifics of songs and harmoniously combined with the artistic trends of expression of the exotic and the mystical. However, the individual and personal character of the lied contents was recognized as soon as possible, so that the voice-piano component remained definitory to the genre, which contributed to a certain improvement of the vocal and instrumental technique.

3. Results

After a series of attempts to synthesize the two arts - literature and music - made by early romantics such as Schulz, Zelter, Reinhardt, Zumsteag or Löwe, whose compositions demonstrate classicist roots, Schubert is the one who actually founds the lied in the romantic version of the genre. With a compositional repertoire of over 600 lieds, the musician showed exhaustive knowledge and individual interpretation of the texts signed by his contemporaries, but also by those whose names were already recognized by universal literature. Thus, being inspired by Goethe, Heine, Schiller, Müller, Mayrhofer, Novalis, Shakespeare, Petrarca or Metastasio, and „impressed by the creations inspired from the time's ballads”⁶⁹, it is not surprising that Schubert's name was and will continue to be associated mainly with the genre in question.

In addition, “in all his lieds Schubert tries to deepen the poetic meaning, that is why he carefully puts forward his poetry before translating it into music. Apart from the general poetic meaning, he seeks to penetrate all the inflections of the word, of the poetic phrase, he follows the accents from the metrics of the verse, hence the perfect unity between melody and verse. To all this he adds the piano music that goes beyond the quality of just an accompanist, permanently contributing to the shaping of the poetic-melodic image.”⁷⁰ Thus, Liszt - the one who played a significant role in the post-mortem spread of Schubert's works - rightly states that Schubert was "the most poetic musician who ever lived”.⁷¹

The most frequent poets in his lieds are Goethe, Mayrhofer and Schiller, but the most widespread and popular are the lieds composed on Müller's lyrics, included in the cycles *Die Schöne Müllerin* (Beautiful Mill) and *Winterreise* (Winter Journey). These lieds also participated in establishing the genre, its musical and poetic potential, and the almost operatic-dramatic narrative.⁷² On the other hand, the lieds on texts by Goethe have the deepest meanings, and through

⁶⁹ Lipceanu E. G. *Pianistica în miniatura vocal-instrumentală a secolului al XIX-lea și prima jumătate a secolului XX*. Iași: Artes, 2006, p. 18

⁷⁰ Brumaru L., Petrescu H. *Istoria muzicii și formele muzicale: experimental manual: for the IX-X grades of music highschools from București*: Editura didactică și pedagogică, 1978, p. 176

⁷¹ https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Franz_Schubert

⁷² https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Franz_Schubert

Gretchen am Spinnrade, Schubert "made his poetry sing and the music speak", this lied being considered a precursor of the symphonic poem.⁷³

Regarding the musician's style of composition, it can be seen, through a detailed analysis of the genre, that "before Schubert's influence, the lied tended to a strophic structure, a syllabic treatment of the text, evoking the qualities of traditional music specific to nationalist romanticism"⁷⁴, and with Schubert what stands out are the cantability and suppleness of the melodies, the dramatic character, the unexpected harmonies, the eloquent piano figurations or the variety of simple strophic forms with tendencies towards free forms conjugated with monologues or instrumental moments. All together prove that Schubert's lied was an immediate consequence, being a sonant result of feelings and sentiments. Therefore, the musician had a great ease in composing lieds, so that they were of a unique spontaneity.⁷⁵

And yet, all this is not enough argument to speak of Schubert as an innovator of the lied. Or, apart from the great merit he had in the context of establishing the particularity and value criteria of the genre⁷⁶, the musician only managed to transpose on the scores certain literary contents, and the very result of the process proves an impressive responsibility that the composer assumed with each lied in which he tended to recreate, rewrite and rethink a set of lyrics⁷⁷.

On a higher level of the present issue is another pianist of the nineteenth century who is equally passionate about music and literature. After being noted for his piano miniatures, Schumann also integrated the voice in the communication of poetic images⁷⁸, creating a repertoire of about 250 lieds. And if "Schubert chose from what the poetry of the time offered him only those texts that were closer to his own feelings and experiences, either of a charming naivete or of great depth, Schumann will end up sifting from his readings only those poems that stood out"⁷⁹. In addition, Schumann was the first musician whose ambitions to become a writer resulted in real attempts. Fueled to some extent by his father's status as a bookseller, publisher, and translator, he was influenced by Richter's and Hoffmann's works⁸⁰.

Thus, "flirting with the literary pen, Schumann, a complex personality, but obsessed with fear and nostalgia (...) will approach, especially the poetry of symbols, of allusions. Hence, a very different choice, compared to Schubert, of poets, and as a result, the elaboration of a more complex musical language⁸¹. However, even though the depth of his musical thinking and the rendering of his lyrics offer something different to the lied's history, Schumann is considered a successor to his great forerunner and by no means a stylistic opponent of him. The first and most lieds demonstrate Schumann's special penchant for Heine's lyrics.

⁷³ <http://www.rasfoiesc.com/hobby/muzica/Franz-Schubert-si-liedul-roman38.php>

⁷⁴ https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Franz_Schubert

⁷⁵ <http://www.rasfoiesc.com/hobby/muzica/Franz-Schubert-si-liedul-roman38.php>

⁷⁶ Lipceanu E. G. op. cit., p. 18

⁷⁷ *Lied*. In: The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians. Vol. VIII. London: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 1980, p. 830-847

⁷⁸ <http://www.creeaza.com/familie/diverse/muzica/Etape-istorice-in-afirmarea-si711.php>

⁷⁹ Ștefănescu I. *O istorie a muzicii universale*, vol. III. București: Editura Fundației Culturale Române, 1998, p. 162

⁸⁰ <http://americansymphony.org/robert-schumann-1810-56/>

⁸¹ Lipceanu E. G., op. cit., p. 18

However, the illustrious Goethe, Chamisso, Byron, Eichendorff, Möricke, Lenau, Uhland or Röckert were not ignored, in whose creation the composer found himself. After learning about their work, Schumann created the cycles *Dichterliebe* (Love of the Poet) and *Frauenlieben und Leben* (Love and Life of a Woman) - two cycles through which the musician marked the beginning and even the apogee of a new era in the evolution of the genre, ensuring a valuable transition between Schubert's and Wolf's lied.

As for the innovative value introduced by Schumann in the circuit of the history of the genre, compared to the inconsistency of the Schubertian narrative process that could cause a slight separation of literary and musical components and, implicitly, a loss of narrative, the Schumannian lied demonstrates the use of conscious rationality to produce an aggregate⁸². Therefore, perhaps, most of his lieds are conceived and grouped in cycles, within which the composer, giving more emphasis to the word and ensuring unity of subject, theme or atmosphere, guarantees a perfect application of dramaturgies worthy of great artistic creations. Based on this invention, but also with the help of the piano - compared to Schubert's scores, in Schumann's creations the piano becomes a confidant with whom the author shares certain subtleties – through Schumann the expressive intensities acquire new peaks of authenticity. "Whether it is the frequent duality of his creation (avidness - resignation) or the nuances of originality in the increasingly complex and diverse in terms of harmony and rhythm of the piano accompaniment, such stylistic features are outlined from the beginning, announcing the emergence of a new creative identity"⁸³.

After "Schubert and Schumann had crystallized a musical genre with archetypal features, sometimes determined by the value of the poetic texts approached, signed by prominent personalities of literary art"⁸⁴, Brahms - without generally neglecting the verses of the illustrious creators - addresses himself especially to minor authors, such as Groth or Daumer, being attracted by their nostalgic expressions. In addition, some of the 200 Brahmsian lieds appear to be simple songs on anonymous texts from folklore or on biblical themes, for which the musician provided vocal-pianistic arrangements rather classical than romantic. Appreciated on the musical side by Wagner himself - who said: "this is what can be said through old forms, if you know how to handle them"⁸⁵ – Brahms was directly targeted by Schumann's indignation, who condemned the mediocre lyrics, saying that "nothing is more beautiful than to place a crown of music on the forehead of a true poet. But is it worth the effort to waste such a wreath for an insignificant verse?"⁸⁶

In the context of a repertoire of compositions strongly dominated by symphonic and chamber instrumental opposites, Brahms' lieds are less well known than those of his other guild colleagues. Despite this, each lied has an expressive character and a well-defined individuality, expressing the moods of Brahms and

⁸² *Lied*. In: The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians. Vol. VIII. London: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 1980, p. 830-847

⁸³ Lipceanu E. G. *op. cit.*, p. 18

⁸⁴ *Ibidem*

⁸⁵ Wagner R. *Opera și drama*. București: Editura Muzicală, 1983, p. 76

⁸⁶ Ionescu E. *Schumann, viața și opera*. București: Editura Muzicală, 1962, p. 190

his life that is being absorbed by an unconditional sincerity. Thus, after more than 40 years of personal and musical experiences, the cycle *Vier ernste Gesänge* (Four Serious Songs) on the Old Testament texts, published after learning about Clara Schumann's stroke, becomes the culmination and, at the same time, the end of his list of lieds.

From a stylistic point of view, the musical part combines some influences of several lied composers. For example, various strophic structures are borrowed from Schubert "harmonically and polyphonically treated according to classical technique"⁸⁷, sonant and literary purity, but also simplistic writing specific to vocal melodies with integrated instrumental accompaniment or subordinated to the voice line, and from Schumann - the unity of cycles with elements of concentric form pronounced at different levels and occasionally the importance given to the piano, the Brahmsian piano conception being sometimes symphoned and invested with organ and harp resonances.⁸⁸

What Brahms brings as a novelty in his compositional language is the richness and variety of melodic inspiration and the density of piano accompaniment, all taking place in an accentuated lyrical climate, because the author also confesses himself, but, moreover, invites the audience to accompany him in playing of the inner feelings of his loneliness. At the same time, a certain decency does not Wolf is another composer of the Romantic era, who, through his creative work in the direction of lieds, reminds us of Schubert through the melodicity, purity and musical expression offered to the lyrics, of Schumann through the deep conceptualization of the texts - having as well impressive abilities of perception and interpretation of literature⁸⁹, but also having a career as a music critic - and the grouping in cycles or albums of some lieds composed after a single poet, by Brahms through the biblical themes or by Wagner through the high level of psychoanalysis of the contents and at the same time the rejection of the archetypal formulas of the genre.

But the Wolfian style was not one of pure synthesis in the field of German romantic lied, as could be later seen especially in the opposites of maturity, but one worthy of being considered as the apogee of the genre. In general, "Wolf's story is one of the most extraordinary in the history of art and allows a privileged look at the mysteries of human genius."⁹⁰, as Romain Rolland would say. He himself also called Wolf „Wagner of the lied”. Or, „the detail although subordinate to the whole, has a special value”⁹¹ in the Wolfian scores, as well as the Wagnerian ones. In fact, “for Wolf the lied was a creation that excited him, in which emotion is combined with extreme tension. The form of the poetry dictates the musical form, Wolf following in the lied the principles established by Wagner in the opera, and being considered one of the great psychologists of music who orchestrated some lieds on his own.”⁹²

⁸⁷ Ciochină P. *Liedul postromantic german*. Iași: Lumen, 2006, p. 33

⁸⁸ Lipceanu E. G., *op. cit.*, p. 19

⁸⁹ *Lied*. In: *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. Vol. VIII. London: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 1980, p. 843

⁹⁰ <https://www.amazon.fr/Hugo-Wolf-Romain-Rolland/dp/8898630174>

⁹¹ <http://www.rasfoiesc.com/hobby/muzica/Franz-Schubert-si-liedul-roman38.php>

⁹² <http://www.rasfoiesc.com/hobby/muzica/Franz-Schubert-si-liedul-roman38.php>

In the more than 300 lieds composed in about twenty years - of which 53 were on verses by Mörike, 20 on verses by Eichendorff, 51 on verses by Goethe, 90 on verses by Heyse or Geibel, all gathered in large collections, or on verses by Shakespeare, Ibsen, Byron, Heine, Lenau and Michelangelo, these being separate, Wolf made sure that music he used was the most appropriate way to highlight a poetic text. "The melody is outlined based on the finest nuances, subtleties of the poetic text. The sung recitation replaces in many cases the singable line. Harmony is more complex, creating sounds rich in nuances and colorations, helping to render the atmosphere characteristic of the text. There is an independence between the vocal and the instrumental part, the vocal soloist and the piano being two individualities, with a specific contribution to each other in rendering of the meanings, in capturing the psychological side and in emphasizing the dramatic note that the poetry contains."⁹³

4. Conclusions

The range of German composers concerned with the fate of the lied extends beyond the early twentieth century or even later. Mahler, Strauss, Hindemith or the three representatives of the new Viennese school - Schönberg, Webern and Berg - continued to add some personality to the genre through increasingly innovative techniques. But it seems that the decline of the romantic lied in historical and social terms had begun a little earlier, even during the Wolfian era. Or, "as Schubert reduced the works of Mozart and Beethoven and Haydn's oratorios to a miniature setting, Wolf adopted Wagner's style"⁹⁴, Mahler added a profound symphony, and with Hindemith and the first avant-garde lied, purely instrumental features were imprinted on the lied, found under the strong influence of experimentalism. Only Strauss tried to revive the lied's romantic style, but it seems that the true expression of the genre that had been led to great peaks by Schubert, Schumann, Brahms and Wolf had already been lost in the abyss of history.

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⁹³ Brumaru L., Petrescu H., op. cit., p. 182-183

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