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# Schumann's Frauenliebe Und Leben: An analysis of "Nun hast du mir den ersten Schmerz getan"

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Schumann's *Frauenliebe Und Leben*: An analysis of "Nun hast du mir den ersten Schmerz getan"

Based on a poem cycle by Adelbert von Chamisso (1781-1838) Robert Schumann's *Frauenliebe Und Leben* (1810-1856, published 1840) follows the journey of a woman in love, depicting the first time she sees her lover, through marriage, and finally, years later, death. The eighth song in the cycle, "Nun hast du mir den ersten Schmerz getan" ("Now you have caused me pain for the first time"), will be of particular focus in this paper, as Schumann uses many unique techniques in this song that differentiate it from the other seven in the cycle. My analysis will point to specific aspects of why Schumann's song is so special, and why he makes the musical decisions that he does. This song can be divided into three sections: first, when the woman's husband first passes away, second, how she feels about his passing, and lastly, her sad reminiscence of their life together. Text painting, unclear tonal centers, dynamics, and a lack of cadences in this final song cycle all work together to convey a sense of solemnity and emptiness, present in the poem. With the use of these techniques Schumann unifies the text and the music, making Chamisso's poem persuasive and poignant, allowing for the free expression of the woman's feelings. This mood is further reinforced by the music even after the poem ends, with a coda, when the piano continues with the slow melody from a previous song in the cycle, this time unaccompanied. The coda brings the entire song cycle full-circle, allowing for a closer bond between the song and the poem, and a deeper connection with the listener.

As the eighth and final song in the cycle, "Nun hast du mir den ersten Schmerz getan" has a special role in Schumann's song cycle. It marks the end of the woman's romance with her husband, as he has succumbed to "the sleep of death" (Line 4). In order to fully understand the last song in the cycle, we must first understand the parts of the story that come

before it in the seven previous songs. The cycle begins as the woman—the narrator in the poems—tells the story of her life as it relates to her romance with her late husband. The first song depicts the first time the woman sees the man. Though he does not notice her at first sight, she is awestruck by him, and cannot stop thinking about him, she believes that he must be too “glorious” for her. Eventually her dreams do come true, and although she is initially anxious about the wedding, they get married. She is overjoyed to be with him, and describes the event as “the tranquil, lovely dream of childhood.” Shortly after, when the newness of the marriage has worn off, the woman becomes pregnant, and she talks about how wonderful and rewarding motherhood is.

It is after this moment, many years later after their child is grown, that the eighth song begins, differentiating itself from the others with its strictly solemn, melancholy tone. To this point, the majority of the songs in the cycle have focused on how happy the woman’s husband made her feel, or her concern about what she can do to inspire his happiness. In some of the songs she appears to be singing to him directly, other times to her friends and sisters about him, and still other times, the woman can be conceived as singing to herself about her feelings of elation, wallowing in them. The eighth song is unique in that it does not rely on her husband’s presence, since he is no longer with her. Instead, it relies heavily upon her expressing and coming to terms with her own feelings, making this song distinctive from the other seven, and more emotional. Now she is no longer singing about her feelings of elation towards her husband—whose romance has been with her for years—but rather about her loss and sadness.

In pursuance of the same tone as in Chamisso’s poem, Schumann’s music reflects the woman’s feelings of emptiness and disparity without her husband. Excluding the coda, “Nun hast du mir den ersten Schmerz getan” consists mainly of slow-moving (the tempo is marked

*adagio*) chords, which copy and reflect the solemnity of the poem. Brittany Denham, in her analysis of Schumann's compositional process within song cycles notes that, "By creating an accompaniment which provides only the bare necessities and a vocal line which tends to linger on one pitch before allowing itself to slowly move on to something else, Schumann has captured the stunned disbelief and pure sorrow experienced by the widow" (Denham 52). Combining the moderately slow and non-specific tempo with held, non-moving chords allows the woman to more freely and convincingly express her feelings in the soprano line above. These sustained chords play an important part in establishing the overall mood of the song as solemn and empty, again, differentiating it from the other seven songs in the cycle. Beginning in the key of D Minor, the minor quality also works with the text and the tempo from the very beginning of the piece to capture the woman's feelings most exactly as they are in the poem.

While the piece does begin solidly in the key of D Minor, the key becomes ambiguous just seven bars in—ironically right after the woman sings of her husband's "sleep of death" (line 4). The chord following the word 'death' can be analyzed as a pivot chord in which a V flat 9 / iv in the original key of D Minor is reinterpreted as a V flat 9 chord in the new key of G Minor. The introduction of the dominant flat-nine chord right after the word 'death' emphasizes the intense pain and sadness that the woman feels with its distinct melancholy sound. While not completely dissonant, this is the first time in the piece that a more dissonant sonority has been heard—to this point it has been all i, iv, and V chords—and the ninth chord draws attention to itself, and therefore, the text that goes with it. The text here is further emphasized by the *sforzando* dynamic marking under the flat-nine chord. This dynamic is found in all but two measures of the first seven bars of the song, and is used twice more in bars 10 and 11, but no more in the rest of the song. Such an acute and forceful dynamic, as is marked on the very first chord of the piece and

nearly every measure of the following seven measures, is indicative of Schumann's ability to bring out the severely intense emotions of the narrator. Here, the woman is singing about how the pain of her husband's death "strikes" (line 2) her. In this way, the sharp, quick, and loud *sforzando* which is found in almost all of bars 1-7 is exemplary of how the woman is "struck" with pain. These first seven measures encapsulate the entire first stanza of the poem, and complete the first section of the song, the woman's initial feelings upon realizing her husband's death:

Nun hast du mir den ersten Schmerz getan, Der aber traf. Du schläfst, du harter, unbarmherz'ger Mann, Den Todesschlaf.	Now you have caused me pain for the first time, and how it struck. You sleep, you hard, merciless man, the sleep of death.
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The end of this first stanza marks a pointed change in the musical direction of the piece, one which appears to be very unclear. It is interesting that at the end of the second measure Schumann foreshadows this uncertainty with a rootless chord. He begins the song with a clear i chord in D Minor, then moves to a clear iv chord, and follows these with a V 4/2 chord, which contains all of the pitches except for the root. Continuing with this idea of an unclear tonal center, from bar seven on, Schumann does not present a true cadence at all until the measure before the piano coda (bar 22), and even then, it is only a half cadence—a V<sup>7</sup> chord back in the original tonic key of D Minor. Even prior to bar seven there is only one cadence in measure four, and it is an IAC, rather than the harmonically stronger PAC. Following measure seven, instead of cadencing, he prepares the chords to cadence, but continues to reject it, moving on to new tonal centers as often as chord to chord, not long enough to establish a key. Common-tone seventh chords are further evidence of the ambiguous tonal center, and Schumann uses various ever-

changing common-tone sevenths for several bars right after the woman sings, "the world is empty" (line 6), continuing through, "I am no longer living" (line 8). After the woman sings this line, Schumann goes on to yet again prepare a cadential 6/4 cadence, only to reject it as he did the others, and 'resolve' to another common-tone seventh chord.

In this second section of the song is where the woman conveys her feelings about her husband's death. She first explains that "the world is empty" (line 6), but goes on to say that while she has "loved and lived" (line 7), she is now "no longer living" (line 8). The dissonances of the common-tone seventh chords which cannot be rooted in a single key depict the woman's uncertainty. She does not know how to live without her husband, as she has not had to live without him since before their first meeting. The dissonant sonorities of this second section also help to differentiate it from the first section, which is tonally rooted in the key of D Minor. Even the dominant chords in this second section sound unusual due to the constantly changing keys. As the text changes from "lived" to "no longer living", the dynamics also reflect this change from section one to section two of the song. The *sforzandos* from the first section are found again at the beginning of this section in measures 10 and 11. However, starting in measure 12, the dynamic makes the abrupt change from *forte* to *subito piano*, eventually decrescendoing in each measure in order to reach the *pianissimo* in measure 16. The text here, "I withdraw silently into myself, / the veil falls" (lines 9-10) aligns with the *pianissimo* dynamic to create the allusion of a whisper as the woman is "withdrawing silently" into herself.

The final two lines of the poem, "there I have you and my lost happiness, / you my world!" (lines 11-12) create a dramatic ending to the text. After two short quart rests, these last two lines immediately follow the text in which the woman whispers about how she "withdraws silently" into herself, making them even more somber than they would have been out of context.

The dynamics remain at *pianissimo* here, continuing with the idea of a whisper from the beginning of the stanza. In addition to the subdued dynamic marking, a *ritardando* spreads out upon the three measures which hold the last two lines of the poem. This *ritardando* is absolutely essential in Schumann's depiction of the woman's emotions. To this point, she sings of the stabbing pain and abandonment she feels now that her husband is gone, but with the whisper of the last stanza of the poem, the mood becomes even more somber:

Ich zieh mich in mein Innres still zurück,  
Der Schleier fällt,  
Da hab ich dich und mein verlornes Glück,  
Du meine Welt!

I withdraw silently into myself,  
the veil falls,  
there I have you and my lost happiness,  
you my world!

The *ritardando* and soft dynamic marking coupled with the woman singing of "lost happiness" in her world create a sense of defeat. It seems as though the woman has nothing left to live for without her husband and does not know how to move forward in his absence. In this final stanza the harmonies finally begin to move back to the original key of D Minor, and the last word of the poem is accompanied by a  $V^7$  chord in D Minor, an unambiguous half cadence which reinforces the idea of the woman's uncertainty about how to move forward through the burden of death. To make this point as clear as possible, Schumann places the last word, "world" on the downbeat of measure 22 as a half note, with a fermata over it, while the piano plays a whole note chord also with a fermata. With the help of the *ritardando*, soft dynamic, and the fact that the soprano's note is shorter than the chord in the piano, this held half cadence allows the woman to slowly die away before the piano continues with the coda.

The solo piano coda which follows the text in "Nun hast du mir den ersten Schmerz getan" further differentiates this song from the others in the cycle. While many of the songs do

use the piano to end the song after the poem has finished, this is the only song to contain a long, melodic piano line. The coda stands out as so individual because in addition to its length and melody, it also has a different key and time signature from that of the beginning of the song. As well as this section's difference in length and melody from the beginning of the song, the rhythms are also different. Measures 1-22 consisted of slow-moving, sustained chords, but here the rhythms are shorter and less sustained, allowing for movement even without the vocal soprano line. For these reasons, it can stand alone as a coda while the solo piano lines in the other songs merely continue the soprano's line. While the first half of the piece does not contain any clear cadences, and the text ends with an open-sounding half cadence, the piano coda ends with a clear V to I IAC in B flat Major. The cadence occurs on a downbeat, making it even stronger and more convincing.

Schumann, however, does not simply end the last song in the cycle with no reference to the other songs. Instead, he gives the audience an additional satisfaction by bringing the woman's life full-circle, connecting the eighth and final song to the first. The piano coda depicts the woman's memories of her late husband; though unspoken, the open-ended way in which the text ends with the half cadence leaves the audience feeling her longing and emptiness. Aiming to truly express the woman's feelings and memories, Schumann revisits the music from "Seit ich ihn gesehen" ("Since I saw him"), the first song in the cycle. He takes the time signature, key signature, and notes verbatim from the first song, when the woman is singing about the first time she saw her soon-to-be husband. James Hall's research explains that in this way, "By repeating the music of the first of the eight songs, Schumann suggests the widow in her grief turning back through the years to picture her hero as when first his image filled her dreams" (Hall 63). He is deliberate in his choice to include a coda with solo piano; since her husband is no longer present,



the woman can only reminisce about him, and including her voice with the piano would not differentiate it enough from the first song. In addition to the exclusion of the voice here, the tempo marking for the coda is different than the tempo marking in the first song. The coda is marked *adagio*, faster than it was first heard in the first song marked *larghetto*. This difference is mainly due to the vastly reminiscent nature of the coda, the same reason that it is only a portion of the first song, not all of it. The coda rarely strays from its home key of B flat Major, and most of the chords within it are simple I, IV, and V chords, showing that the woman is remembering simpler, happier times as they were in the first song.

This piano coda is one of the largest reasons that “Nun hast du mir den ersten Schmerz getan” stands out as such a unique part of Schumann’s eight song cycle. It introduces an element to the cycle that is not found in any of the other songs, yet it still effortlessly connects the eighth song back to the first with its clearly cyclical concept as it relates to the woman’s romance. Similarly, the three sections of the eighth song—while different in terms of key, sonority, and mood—connect to one another through the use of pivot chords, dynamics, and phrasing. Schumann is able to capture the poignancies held within the poem by unifying the text and the music rather than treating them as separate entities. With this unification, the chords and harmonies rely on the text for meaning while the text also relies on the chords and harmonies below. He uses the dynamics in section one to emphasize the woman’s striking pain, but at the same time still foreshadows the uncertainty and emptiness of the second section with a rootless chord. The contrast of the Mm flat nine chord marks the divide between sections one and two, but also gives way to the dissonances and ambiguities of the second section. By the end of the second section the dynamics contrast the first, and the narrator is able to slowly fade away while leading into the soft and slow piano coda—a section which brings the song full-circle—making

the cycle complete. The interdependencies and programmatic nature of this song make it one of Schumann's most relatable and most romantic pieces, and enable the audience to truly connect with both Schumann and Chamisso in a way that cannot be possible with all music.

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