

**David Ferris. *Schumann's Eichendorff "Liederkreis" and the Genre of the Romantic Cycle*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. vii, 270 pp.**

*Reviewed by Richard Kramer*

In the final paragraph of his ambitious and often provocative study of Schumann's great Eichendorff cycle, David Ferris proposes that Schumann "viewed the construction of musical meaning as an interactive process, in which the performer and the listener play as much of a role as the composer, since they must realize, in their own minds, what he has merely implied." Schumann, he continues,

composed his songs with two different audiences in mind. He marketed them widely to amateur singers, who could not be expected to partake in this process, but he also considered the *Liederkreis* to be a private genre, intended for an exclusive circle of refined and sophisticated musicians. At the same time, Schumann knew that his audience was not necessarily restricted to the handful of *Davidsbündler* and the mass of philistines whom he saw around him. (226–27)

Each of these claims, avowed as if truths given to verification, is freighted with all the obscurities as to how and for whom the composer composes.

To contend that Schumann "viewed the construction of musical meaning as an interactive process" is, first of all, to suggest that Schumann sets himself apart from his contemporaries in this endeavor—that he is unusual in this regard. This in itself should raise suspicions. But that's the least of it. It doesn't take much imagination to suppose that a composer (Schumann, if you like) might anticipate that his works will elicit a response, and that the act of responding will constitute in some cases a critical act, even a performerly one. But Ferris wishes us to believe that Schumann composed as though the meaning of his works were a function of some "interactive process," by which must be meant a collaborative dialogue engaging any number of interlocutors with Schumann's text, and all that such a text implies of some shadowy authorial presence. However we think to parse such interactivity in our own minds, it would be helpful to allow that if there is something of significance to be heard in Schumann's Eichendorff *Liederkreis*, this significance must be immanent in all hearings of it, and that the way in which we construe the music is a function of what

is signified. The subjectivity, it seems to me, resides in the music, even as it sets off sympathetic vibrations in those who must contend with it.

I think I know what Ferris is getting at. Schumann's cycle, in tune with much Romantic music, intones hermeneutical riddles. To engage the riddling means less to solve a mystery than to apprehend something of its obscure complexity: not to dissolve an ambiguity, but to take some pleasure in the discomfort that it arouses. For Ferris, this "interactive process" means to insinuate a compositional strategy. As a critical strategy, as a way of contending with the dialogics of text and reader, such "interactivity" makes some sense. For the composer, it is hollow.

I begin at the end because the way in which Ferris formulates his conclusions helps to explain the underlying precepts that drive the arguments of his monograph. To have thought to use the Eichendorff cycle as the work that in some measure defines "the genre of the Romantic cycle" (as it goes in the title) is itself intriguing, for the work embodies an extreme instance of the coupling of poems culled from various sources that together make no pretense to cohesion, to story, to narrative in any of its modes, with a music that, even in its ordering of these twelve poems, imposes a continuity that the poems, on their own, do not possess.

The sense in which these twelve songs constitute a cycle is of much concern to Ferris. Even how the text is constituted is something of a problem, for Schumann himself betrayed ambivalence in how the cycle was to begin. In the version published in 1842, the cycle opens with *Der frohe Wandersmann*, a gruff, open-air song in D major, removed in 1849, in preparation for a second edition, in favor of the *In der Fremde* that a fragment of the surviving autograph powerfully suggests was to have opened the cycle in its original conception. "For the moment," writes Ferris, "I will just point out that my decision to begin my discussion of the Eichendorff songs with 'In der Fremde' and leave out 'Der frohe Wandersmann' does not imply that I consider the second edition of the cycle to be the definitive version or that I have any objections to the performance of the first," in a sentence that tells us too much about Ferris and too little about the problem. "It is simply that because Schumann's setting is so straightforward, 'Der frohe Wandersmann' is not the most apt example for my purposes" (94). That Schumann had thought to inaugurate, and thereby to define, a cycle in two nearly contradictory ways, even with regard to the tonal trajectories set off by each of these two gambits, ought to have provoked some interrogation. But the issue is dropped. We hear nothing more about *Der frohe Wandersmann* (which, by the way, is rather less "straightforward" than Ferris would have us believe).

It is dismaying to learn that the decision to discuss the cycle in its later redaction is merely a function of what Ferris considers to be a more "apt

example" for his "purposes." Here, as elsewhere, we want insight into Schumann's "purposes," and not the author's. Somewhere, we might be told that the composition of *Der frohe Wandersmann* followed only weeks after the rest of what was then published as Opus 39—conceived, that is, with its function as a cycle opener very much in view. What induced Schumann to withdraw from the dark, brooding melancholy of *In der Fremde*, with its F $\sharp$  minor that is of such obvious consequence to the unfolding of the cycle in both its motivic (or intervallic) and its tonal mappings? Was this too on the advice of Clara, who evidently picked out the poems for Schumann in the first place? I can understand that Ferris may not wish to speculate around and about such things, but it seems to me that in a book given to fairly complex theoretical investigations of a single work, we have reason to hope for some serious engagement with Schumann's provocative—and even characteristic—ambivalence. "The implication that the contents of the opus need not be definitively fixed fits quite nicely with the nineteenth-century view of the cycle," Ferris writes (94), claiming to be following Jon Finson, who alleges that to ignore the version with *Der frohe Wandersmann* is to "[miss] the subplot of the cycle and the ironic tone that pervades it." Finson, unlike Ferris, is indeed troubled by this ambivalence: "Alternate versions actually published by the composer cannot be dismissed lightly," he smartly concludes; "if nothing else, they reveal the gulf between the older and the younger Schumann" (Finson 1994:168)—even if, he might have noted, the two versions were actually conceived within weeks of one another. And here is where that final paragraph—of a Schumann who "viewed the construction of musical meaning as an interactive process, in which the performer and the listener play as much of a role as the composer"—comes into play. All this circumstantial evidence tells us that Schumann found himself confronting a dilemma of how to stimulate the cycle into motion. That he came to some decision in the matter—better, that he felt compelled to work through the consequences of such a decision—ought to count for something. Further, there is a categorical distinction to be made between the phenomenon of a work whose *Entstehungsgeschichte* embraces two markedly different texts, on the one hand, and an authorial intent to inscribe both texts as eternally interchangeable. Ferris, it seems to me, entangles the one aesthetic with the other.

An important aspect of Ferris's inquiry is in the identity of evidence that would confirm the idea of cycle. This, it goes without saying, is elusive. For Ferris, *Dichterliebe* is lacking in "narrative discourse" and, most significantly, in "narrative closure." Its famous postlude is understood as "a wistful musical reminiscence that does not contradict the poet's failure to achieve psychological resolution but confirms it." And then, "it is not the vocal melody of the earlier song that comes back but its postlude, which is

unrelated to the vocal melody, and so . . . this is music that is presented solely by the accompaniment, as an afterthought or commentary to each of the songs that it concludes" (207). But surely it is a mistake to separate out the "vocal melody" from the music sounded in the piano. To speak of "accompaniment" in a song by Schumann is to set up an opposition that diminishes all the subtlety of voicing, the internal play with personae—the singer and the pianist forever coupling and decoupling—that drives this music. The postlude is all about closure, if not in the classical sense, even as the ineffable transition to D $\flat$  major is about remembering. The memory, now dim, is of the poignant C $\sharp$  with which the cycle begins, and of the abandoned dominant that it then supports, melting into a more literal remembering of the closing bars of *Am leuchtenden Sommermorgen*—a process yet more complex when these bars are heard first echoed at the inception of the postlude in *Mein Wagen rollet langsam*, a song removed (with three others) from the cycle before its publication. Whatever the poetic significance of this ultimate postlude, it is surely meant to be heard as an internalization of the psychological "action" of the cycle. To hold to some classical sense of closure as a criterion by which the coherence of Romantic cycles is gauged seems to me a tactical error, for it is precisely in the challenge to such classical verities as "closure" that Romantic music achieves the eloquence of ambiguity that is at the core of its language.

In his talk about *Frauenliebe und -Leben*, Ferris takes the high road: "As soon as we acknowledge that the view of women that is presented in the cycle is offensive to us, then we are admitting that its artistic value is in some way impaired" (211). We must then "look to Schumann's biography to help us explain why he made what we consider to be a poor artistic decision." This is patronizing. To recite the litany of works whose mores, whose politics are today found offensive is a cliché of our own time and place. Even if Chamisso's Biedermeier melodrama may induce embarrassment in a hip, unisex society, Schumann's music yet moves us deeply. I, for one, find the language of Eichendorff's "Hast ein Reh du, lieb vor andern" more troubling in what it avows of an animal fragility of woman, in its ominous implications of seizure by power and deceit, more repugnant in what its figures imply of a politics of sexuality. Pick any of the Romantic cycles and you'll find the sexes deployed in a relationship unacceptable in some measure to the sensibilities of the here and now.

The Eichendorff cycle evidently seems to refuse the imposition of biography: "By contrast [to the Chamisso poems], the choice of Eichendorff's poems—which, we should remember, was Clara Wieck's and not Schumann's—does not require an external explanation, because we consider them to be among the finest poems that he set, and so we find adequate reasons for their selection in the texts themselves" (211). What

kind of distinction is being offered here? The question is all the more perplexing, because Ferris, one page earlier, offers up a seductive passage from the Schumann correspondence: "The Eichendorff cycle is certainly my most romantic and there is much of you in it," Schumann wrote to Clara on May 22, 1840, the day on which he completed the last of its twelve songs (*Auf einer Burg*, as it turns out). "Schumann may have been thinking of the fact that it was Wieck who selected the poems and wrote them out for him," Ferris writes. I don't think so. Schumann is conveying something of his own astonishment at what he has composed: the allusion to Clara's presence *in the music* has an erotic message, at once obscure and suggestive. To claim that Schumann's effusion is merely "a personal communication and not a statement of aesthetic intent" is to construct an overly rigid opposition that misses the point. Better, I think, to conjure Schumann gushing in passionate sympathy with the messages embedded in the music.

Ultimately, the much vexed issue of tonality is exercised. Does key matter? Ferris dodges in and out of the question through much of the book, and two passages will have to stand for much of the argument. Having cited a review published in 1840 of the Heine *Liederkreis*, opus 24, Ferris notes:

the complete succession of keys is laid out for us and the use of terms such as "connecting thread," and "key-cycle," implies that their order is of some significance to the critic. But even in this review we are given no indication that key succession plays a role in organizing the cycle . . . Is [the reviewer] making the . . . claim that the succession creates a coherent structure out of the songs? There is nothing in the text of the review to suggest that he intends [such a] reading. (84)

This, together with other contemporary reviews, is put in evidence "to support [Ferris's] contention that the sequence of keys within a published collection of songs did not carry any structural implications for nineteenth-century musicians." In the course of a revealing letter to Moscheles, some six of whose songs Mendelssohn was arranging for publication, Mendelssohn writes: "The keys certainly ensue most madly . . . all in a muddle; but I have always found that no one thanks you for the most beautiful succession of keys. So please excuse the key fricassee." This Ferris takes as evidence that Mendelssohn "does not consider key succession to be that important—it is a matter of preference and not of necessity." But Mendelssohn's bemused apology—for a set of songs that makes no pretense to cycle, please note—ought to set us to thinking quite the opposite:

that the tonal relationships that follow from the decision to have composed a series of songs in this or that key are indeed of consequence, even if “no one thanks you” for it, and further, that key, even as a mediating aspect within a collection of songs that have no cyclic pretensions, may have some meaningful place, both as an essence of the song itself and in tension with its neighbors.

“I consider this work to be one of the great artistic creations of the nineteenth century,” Ferris writes, as though to reassure himself in the face of what follows:

and I believe that the order in which Schumann arranged the songs contributes in important ways to its greatness. But even if the order of the Eichendorff songs is aesthetically pleasing, that does not mean that it is immutable . . . Schumann was not bound by aesthetic necessity, musical logic, or generic convention to place the songs in the order that he did . . . The work that he ended up with is a whole, but it is a Romantic whole, a whole that is open-ended and fragmentary and that is characterized more by potentiality and implication than it is by a sense of closure. (92)

Here again, Ferris confuses the aesthetic condition of a work that means to suggest itself as fragmentary with a looseness in how the composer conjures his work. This, it seems to me, traduces the very meaning of fragment to the Romantic sensibility. The fragment demanded a concentration of thought no less rigorous than did the fantasy-like improvisations of earlier decades: more rigorous, one might contend, for the “potentiality and implication” that Ferris wants us to feel did not arise from a nonchalance about such matters as tonal relationship. Rather, it is the semblance of nonchalance that is sought, and achieved only through the exercise of much imagination and wit. In the Romantic fragment, there are no loose ends.

Finally, it seems oddly perverse to write as though *Frühlingsnacht* does not mean to convey closure of some kind. For the pianist, it is the most demanding of the lot, its cadencing more emphatically final than those of any other song in opus 39. And then there is the key. Is F# major a mere accident? If the inclination to sing *Frühlingsnacht* in F# major at the end of the cycle is not the function of “aesthetic necessity, musical logic, or generic convention,” it would be good of Ferris to tell us how Schumann might have come to such a decision. Clearly, this is the wrong way to go about it. Even if the confluence of these twelve songs in the order displayed in opus 39 came only after a series of creative “acts” that do not at once reflect this order, we had better resist the temptation to conclude

that opus 39 is some arbitrary catch-all envisioned by its composer to set in motion some “interactive” exchange with its audience. But then, it is hard to know what Ferris wants us to think. When he alleges that “the order in which Schumann arranged the songs contributes in important ways to its greatness” and yet concludes that this order is not “immutable,” he is playing with words.

In fact, *Frühlingsnacht* occupies a central role in the chapter called “Weak Openings,” in a brace of studies given to a close reading of five songs. The analyses themselves are good, solid graphings of the linear and harmonic underpinnings of songs which seem to have been chosen because they exemplify what Ferris calls “open endings” and “weak openings.” Not everyone will be persuaded by Ferris’s hearing of the opening phrases of *Frühlingsnacht* that “its key remains ambiguous . . . primarily because of Schumann’s pervasive use of chromaticism” (123). Surely, the tonic is never in doubt, even as those phrases embrace secondary and tertiary relationships within it. But the larger point is well taken: that the concluding bars are made powerful in inversionsal proportion to the volatile instability of the opening phrases (if I have put this correctly).

But in some measure, it is the final sung phrase of the song that drives Ferris to his most impassioned prose. There are two issues, and they are clearly related in Ferris’s view. First, there is the music. The full close at “Sie ist Deine, sie ist Dein!” (other Eichendorff sources have “Deine . . . dein” and “deine . . . dein”; in an early draft, Schumann writes “deine . . . Dein”), a clinching act underscored by the clarity of articulation in the piano, is undermined, following Ferris, by the voice cadencing in octaves with the bass. Then there is the poetic text. This ending “is among the most misunderstood moments” in the cycle (131). How so? Adorno (1958:134–39), Turchin (1981:279, 313), Thym (1974:219–20), McCress (1986:23–25), and Daverio—called upon to testify to the misunderstanding—hear something akin to what Daverio describes as “a great arch from melancholic alienation to ecstatic union with the objects of the poet’s longing” (1997:209, 214–16). In Ferris’s view, all such readings “are based on a curious assumption about the relationship between Schumann and his art,” and in particular, about the “external circumstances of Schumann’s life, and not his personality” (210); the real meaning is to be gleaned from a closer study of the poetic texts.

For Ferris, these are poems not about the simple condition of love and its sorrows, but about “our yearning to transcend our earthly state . . . The various narrators of the cycle express this yearning, . . . and although some of the narrators describe the ecstatic feeling that they have already become one with nature, as in ‘Mondnacht’ and ‘Frühlingsnacht’, it is merely a glimpse of the afterlife to come” (216). When our poet ejaculates—when

Schumann's singer sings—"Sie ist Deine, sie ist Dein," it is not, evidently, about love consummated (in even the figurative sense) but about something else: "It is again the night, and not the narrator, who speaks at the end of 'Frühlingsnacht', in part through the nightingales' song. Finally, Eichendorff reveals what it is that the night says: It expresses the narrator's own inner desire"—the desire, we learn in the next paragraph, "to transcend our earthly state." Some distinctions are in order. First, the poems are culled by the Schumanns from all over the place. Situating *Frühlingsnacht* at the end of the cycle was Schumann's idea, not Eichendorff's, and so the placement of "Sie ist Deine, sie ist Dein" only amplifies, even perhaps distorts, whatever sentiment Eichendorff means to express. Then, there is the matter of Ferris's "narrators." Is "narrator" the right agent for the bearer of all these poetic effusions? Narrator denotes narrative, and the telling of tales. But that seems contrary to Ferris's reading of the poems. Then, whatever we call this voice, it seems to me wrong to think that it is "the night, and not the narrator, who speaks at the end of 'Frühlingsnacht'." There is no change of voice here. Rather, the poetic voice tells us what the nightingales sing—meaning: this is what I hear the nightingales to be telling me, lonely, deluded poet that I am.

Underscoring the deeply mystical, transcendental themes of Eichendorff's poetry, Ferris brings some fresh insight into texts that we know too well. And yet we are left to ponder whether Schumann's music constitutes a deepening of these themes, or whether it filters them through a lens focused less on death and redemption and more on the pain and loneliness of the lover. I do not mean that even these two foci are separable. They blur into one another, as they must. Finally, whatever the poems, on the one hand, and the songs, taken individually, might mean, such meanings are subsumed under something greater and yet more complex in the overarching *Liederkreis*. If the poems, taken alone, suggest a cast of personae, in Schumann's cycle this plurality melds into the single, bardic voice.

"Ambitious and often provocative," I wrote at the outset, meaning to signal a virtue and a flaw. Ferris has much to tell us that will alter how we approach this wonderful music, even as he bravely challenges the old cherished concept of the Romantic cycle that he is at pains to redefine. That the Eichendorff *Liederkreis* is a major and defining work goes without much argument. Even if no two of us will agree precisely why that is so, even if Ferris and I (and no doubt others) will disagree strenuously as to the nature of Romantic song cycle, his book opens up new avenues for the pursuit of these difficult issues, and in the process, forces us to think freshly upon some very old questions.



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