Der Tod und die Forelle: New Thoughts on Schubert's Quintet

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Introductory Note: In the early years of *Current Musicology*, the only required courses beyond the MA level for PhD students in historical musicology were the two "Research Seminars in Musicology," one taught by Denis Stevens and the other by Paul Henry Lang. These courses were designed to engage advanced students in original research, advanced methodology, and significant writing and to prepare them for the qualifying examinations on music history and on theoretical and aesthetic writings in the required languages (French, German, Italian, and Latin). In the fall of 1968, Professor Lang selected as his topic for the research seminar (in which I was enrolled) the symphonies of Franz Schubert. This was the last research seminar given by Professor Lang, who was approaching retirement from Columbia. He divulged to those of us taking the course that in his opinion the three master composers of the tonal era who were most in need of scholarly attention were Handel, Haydn, and Schubert. Lang self-confidently claimed that his recently published study of Handel was setting the record straight on that great composer but that similar work still needed to be done on the other two, and especially on Schubert's instrumental compositions.[1] The seminar whetted my appetite, and I soon found that Lang was quite right: there was, for example, not a single complete recording of the Schubert symphonies by a major orchestra back in 1968. I decided to write my PhD dissertation on the Schubert symphonies, and so my interest in Schubert's instrumental music got its start.[2]

The "Trout" Quintet, D. 667, is Franz Schubert's best-known chamber music composition. There are myriad recordings of it, and it is often studied in music appreciation classes. The quintet's catchy and buoyant tunes appeal to listeners, and its relationship to one of Schubert's most popular songs makes it a good conversation piece.[3] As the music critic Conrad Wilson has written, "If you wish to introduce somebody to the world of chamber music, this is surely the work with which to do so" (2003:21).

While the date of composition of the "Trout" Quintet remains an open question, I am convinced that 1819 is the "correct" date, for reasons that will become clear to the reader shortly, as well as because of the arguments in favor of 1819 provided by Piero Weiss (1979). Legitimate reasons exist

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for considering 1823 and 1825 as other possibilities, but in the final analysis the earlier date makes the most sense.[4]

This A Major quintet for piano, violin, viola, cello, and double bass is most often described with words such as "simple," "pleasant," "carefree," "diverting," and "serene." While such modifiers are not altogether inappropriate, they do not do justice to this composition, because they do not look beneath its surface, nor do they consider its extramusical possibilities. They pay too little attention to the song that served as its inspiration, and to Schubert's attachment to this song and the poem that gave rise to it. My purpose here is not to reclassify the "Trout" Quintet as a programmatic piece that tells a specific story but, rather, to suggest that the musical and the extramusical elements in the song may have influenced the chamber work profoundly, rendering it a more seriously conceived composition than is generally assumed.

Certainly, one of Schubert's most popular Lieder is *Die Forelle* (*The Trout*, D. 550), and it is a song to which he kept returning between 1816 and 1821. In fact, Schubert wrote five versions of this song (two between the end of 1816 and July 1817, and one each in 1818, 1820, and 1821). All of them are very similar, but only in the final version did Schubert add in the familiar piano introduction, with its ascending sextuplet flourishes that suggest the merry trout darting about in the brooklet.[5] It is easy to hear this song as a folklike ditty that has little depth of feeling, but we must not be fooled by its apparent simplicity. Its storyline, after all, is about life and death, and its title character is killed by an uncaring fisherman—Death's deputy in this narration. Moreover, it is clear that Schubert did not respond to this tale casually, as he kept returning to it during a five-year stretch. He even altered the tempo designation in each revision, changing it from *mässig* (moderate) to *nicht zu geschwind* (not too fast) to *etwas geschwind* (somewhat fast) to *etwas lebhaft* (somewhat lively) and back again to *etwas geschwind*.

Including the quintet, then, Schubert concerned himself with *Die Forelle* each year between 1816 and 1821. But 1819 was a special year for Schubert. His biographers tell us that he was happy that summer, on holiday in Steyr in the Austrian Alps with the singer Johann Michael Vogl (1768–1840), a good friend. An upbeat letter that the twenty-two-year-old Franz Schubert wrote from Steyr to his older brother Ferdinand on July 13, 1819, refers to eight girls, almost all of them pretty, who were in the home where he was lodging, and mentions one pretty girl in particular who played the pianoforte nicely and was going to sing several of his songs.[6] Furthermore, in a letter from Linz on August 19 to one of Franz's other friends, the poet Johann Mayrhofer (1787–1836), Schubert wrote that he was in very good health and that in Steyr he had already had a very good time and was looking forward to more fun there.[7]

And 1819 was a time of contentment for Schubert for another, more important, reason. It was the year in which he began fully to enjoy and profit from his decision the previous summer to abandon permanently the profession of school teaching, which his father had forced him into as early as the autumn of 1814 and which had prevented him from writing music for large stretches of time. Schubert's comments in a letter to his friends written in Zseliz on August 3, 1818, exude relief and joy: "I live and compose like a god, as though that were as it should be . . . I hope that you are all merry and in the best of health, as I am. Thank God I live at last, and it was high time, otherwise I should have become nothing but a thwarted musician."[8] Another letter, dated October 12, 1818, sheds additional light on Schubert's situation after leaving his father's school. This one was sent to Franz by his much older brother Ignaz, who, at the age of thirty-three, was still teaching at their father's school. Ignaz wrote: "You happy creature! How enviable is your lot! You live in sweet, golden freedom, can give free rein to your musical genius, may let your thoughts stray where they will: you are loved, admired and idolized . . ."[9] And after angrily decrying the fact that there is no longer any laughter in their father's home, Ignaz continued: "You see, you are now free of all these things, you are delivered, you see and hear nothing of all these goings-on . . ."[10] At first, after the break in 1818, Franz and his father were extremely angry with one another, but by the summer of 1819 they had mostly reconciled their differences, and the younger Schubert could take delight in living his life fully as a musician.

Freedom to compose was life itself for Schubert, and deprivation of that freedom for almost four years had meant relegation to a deadly existence. With this in mind, I cannot help but think that Schubert may have identified with the little fish in the song he had written and rewritten already twice while a schoolteacher. The trout and the composer both needed their freedom: the fish to swim, Schubert to compose. The fisherman, who muddied up the brook and caught the unlucky fish on his rod, may have reminded Schubert of his father, who had "reeled in" his son and robbed him of his spiritual well-being.

In the 1782 poem written by Christian Friedrich Daniel Schubart (1739–91), there are four stanzas. Schubert set only the first three of these, ending his song with the words "Und ich mit regem Blute / Sah die Betrogne an" ("and I, with my blood boiling, looked at the betrayed one"). Thus, the narrator in Schubert's song concludes on a personal, subjective note, communicating his anger. Schubart's poem, however, goes on to present a moral, advising young girls to be careful to recognize danger and flee from it and to remain cautious at all times—or else pay dearly (like the trout!). "Denkt doch an die Forelle" ("Think, then, of the trout"), warns the poet.

Schubert did not set this final strophe in his song, most likely because he was aiming for a unified, coherent musical work, focusing solely on the tale of the trout and its nemesis.

The poet Schubart was also a journalist, composer, aesthetician, theology student, teacher, organist, harpsichordist, and revolutionary, who spent nearly a decade in prison because of his published "criticisms of policies pursued by the Catholic Church and various courts."[11] It was during his imprisonment that Schubart wrote his famous treatise on the ethos of tonalities (*Ideen zu einer Ästhetik der Tonkunst* [1784–85]), as well as the four poems that Schubert eventually set as Lieder: *An mein Klavier*, D. 342; *Grablied auf einen Soldaten*, D. 454; *An den Tod*, D. 518; and *Die Forelle*, D. 550—all from 1816 and 1817. Schubart was a serious person, and all four poems of his that Schubert set, including *Die Forelle*, are serious poems.[12]

When we listen to Schubert's *Die Forelle* (1821), we can hear the earnestness, concern, and passion in the music composed for the third stanza, in which the fisherman snares his victim. In this section, which opens in the relative minor key, Schubert veers toward a recitative style in the vocal line, lunging up to melodic peaks for such words as "Diebe" ("thief") and "Rute" ("rod"). The syllabic, reiterative hammering on D♭ for the text "er macht das Bächlein tückisch trübe" ("he insidiously muddies up the little brook")—caught here harmonically in a tangle of alternating secondary seventh and half-diminished seventh chords making a crescendo—communicates passion and drama (ex. 1). So, too, do the repetitive block chords in the accompaniment and the descent to the piano part's lowest tone, a dominant root more than two octaves below middle C, and a perfect fourth below the lowest statement of the tonic pitch in the song. The text for this lowest pitch is "zappelt" ("wriggles"), as the trout struggles on the line. This stanza finishes with the same musical refrain that ended the two earlier ones, and the song concludes with quiet and peaceful music. Yet, the combination of the final words of anger and the dramatic music heard just seconds earlier draw the listener into this tiny drama of a fish, a fisherman, and a storyteller clearly siding with the trout.

We know that in such chamber music compositions by Schubert as the String Quartet in A Minor, D. 804, and the "Death and the Maiden" String Quartet in D Minor, D. 810, both written in 1824, Schubert made use of one or more of his own songs. Furthermore, we have learned that he did not limit the musical or the extramusical content of the song to just one movement of the quartet; rather, these spilled into the cycle as a whole.[13] When Schubert used one of his Lieder in a chamber work, he was prone to base some musical events in the various movements of the instrumental composition on musical and poetic issues in the song. With this in mind,

Example 1: Schubert, *Die Forelle*, third stanza, mm. 5–9.

let us see if we can discover such a relationship between song and chamber work in the "Trout" Quintet.[14]

The origins of the quintet are well known. Sylvester Paumgartner, a rich assistant manager of iron mines in Steyr, who was also a collector of music and musical instruments, suggested to Schubert that he write a quintet to be played at Paumgartner's house. His residence contained two music rooms where visiting musicians routinely gathered for entertainments. Paumgartner, who played the cello, even advised Schubert to write this quintet for violin, viola, cello, double bass, and piano, evidently because he liked Hummel's Quintet in D Minor, Op. 74, set for the same ensemble, and had the required players for it. Actually, Hummel had first composed his work as a septet for piano, viola, cello, double bass, flute, oboe, and French horn, and both the septet and the quintet arrangement were published in Vienna in 1816. Paumgartner made the additional request that Schubert incorporate into the new quintet a set of variations on the composer's song *Die Forelle*, a favorite of Paumgartner's.

Thus was the "Trout" Quintet made to order. But Schubert did more than satisfy Paumgartner's requests. He created a first-rate piece of chamber music informed by Schubart's poem and his own song. All five movements refer to the words, sights, sounds, and ideas of the poem and song. Oddly, the most famous movement, the theme and variations on *Die Forelle*, avoids any

direct quotation of the third stanza's dramatic music, but Schubert conveys that stanza's mood in the obligatory minor-mode variation of the set.

Nonetheless, the issues of storytelling, conflict between freedom and subjugation, the celebration of life, and grief and loss through death are all found in the five-movement quintet cycle. The first evidence occurs at the beginning of the opening movement, marked "Allegro vivace." We hear a zesty tonic A Major chord played by the entire ensemble. In both hands of the piano part its energy triggers a two-octave ascending arpeggio in a triplet rhythm. While the double bass clings to its opening tonic pedal point for ten bars, the triplet arpeggio is answered by a melodious four-measure phrase in the other strings that is tentative, *pianissimo*, and moves slowly. As the strings cadence, the piano reiterates its arpeggio, but quietly and in the right hand only. This series of events is repeated, with the string melody slightly altered. A third arpeggiation of the piano, however, pushes the theme out of the tonic and into the flatted submediant (F Major). The double bass dutifully skips down a major third to F♮ for its next pedal point, which lasts for twelve measures. Simultaneously the piano joins the viola with the melody, while the violin and the cello alternate in sounding the arpeggio. The action picks up speed, and we hear the arpeggio not every four measures but, rather, in each and every measure from m. 18 through the end of the opening structural unit in m. 24 and the beginning of the second unit in m. 25. This propulsion toward the cadence at m. 25 is also achieved through the use of crescendo, accent marks, and the harmonic push of the augmented sixth chord into the cadential I^{6}_{4}. With m. 25, the "Trout" Quintet's first movement really takes flight. The music now has drive and continuity, antecedent and consequent phrases, rhythmic life in all the strings (including the double bass), melodic shapeliness, harmonic clarity, and an engagement with the dialectics of sonata form. This second beginning of the piece, then, may be said to serve as the first theme of the sonata-allegro form. If this is the case, what, then, are the first twenty-four measures trying to accomplish?

I believe they serve several purposes. For one thing, they introduce the most important musical motives of the movement. These include the ascending arpeggio, the triplet figuration, the neighbor-note melodic idea, and the key relationship of tonic and flatted submediant. Second, however, this opening section, in the tempo proper of the movement, is not a traditional introduction but, rather, a prologue, or menu, for what lies ahead. Schubert was innovative in creating unique beginnings for some of his instrumental works. Three others that immediately come to mind appear in the "Unfinished" Symphony, D. 729 (1822), the Octet, D. 803 (1824), and the String Quintet, D. 956 (1828). In each of these compositions, Schubert

opens with critically important musical material that is neither the beginning of the sonata-allegro form proper nor a mere introduction to it in the Classical manner. To me, the intriguingly hesitant opening of the "Trout" Quintet suggests the prologue of a story, something like, "Once upon a time, there was a trout that darted about happily in a brook. Little did the fish know that danger was lurking nearby. Let me tell you what happened one day when everything seemed so innocent and cheerful."

Third, these twenty-four measures suggest the descriptive pianistic figuration of the song *Die Forelle*. The chromatic tones of the Lied's accompaniment have been temporarily removed, the range traversed is much wider, and musical continuity has given way to a more dramatic pushing ahead and pulling back of the music; however, the trout can still be perceived, propelling itself through and darting above the water.

The second movement, an Andante in $\frac{3}{4}$ time, is more subtly related to the song. This glowingly beautiful movement is divided into two halves, each of them further subdivided into three thematic sections. A succession of six keys takes place: in the first half Schubert uses F Major, F♯ Minor, and D Major plus G Major for his three thematic units; in the second half he employs A♭ Major, A Minor, and F Major. Thus, the second half is, for the most part, a transposition of the first half up a minor third, and this transposition allows the movement to begin and end in the (traditionally) pastoral key of F Major, a tonality that was already referred to in the opening movement and will be featured in subsequent movements.[15] The key of G, with which the first half ends, is inserted for extra color and also allows the Phrygian F♯, with its well-documented associations with Death, to be redirected as a leading tone.[16] As the midpoint between F♯ and A♭, G in turn also serves as the leading tone to A♭ for the beginning of the second half of the movement.

In its pastoral key, the second movement seems to describe nature in its various moods. Sweeps of musical figuration and accentuation continuously threaten the tranquility in this music, and outpourings of emotional lyricism eventually overwhelm the initial calm. The composer's fixation on the little fish is, perhaps, symbolized by the movement's inclusion of a chromatic set of tonal centers built on the pitches F–F♯–G–A♭–A.[17] While the theme in F♯ Minor can be heard as a lament for the trout, a living fish asserts itself in the many arpeggiation figures in the Andante, such as the ascents in the strings and the descents in the piano when the initial F Major section makes its transition to F♯ Minor (mm. 20–23). The third theme of the Andante also suggests a trout that is very much alive by the recurrence of musical ideas derived from the opening stanza of the song—the ascending leap of a perfect fourth, dotted rhythm, sextuplet figuration, and arpeggiation all turn up

again. The movement even terminates with repetitions of a perfect fourth, the interval with which *Die Forelle* opens, perhaps implying that Death has been defeated, at least for the time being.

The third movement, which culminates in a *fortissimo* ascending A Major arpeggio, is a Scherzo and Trio in a Presto tempo. It is a wonderful example of Schubert's feisty and ebullient scherzo style. Its initial ascents are reminiscent of the upward surges at the opening of the first movement. These are just quicker, shorter, and friskier. This movement is indicative of the newly liberated Schubert's adventurous spirit as a composer, romping through the bumpy rhythms, strings of secondary dominant chords, and kaleidoscopic harmonic connections that became such common characteristics of the new Romantic style. Structured in a tonally playful manner, the Scherzo wavers between rounded binary form and sonata form. Its monothematic first section moves from tonic to tonic at the midpoint, and then—in a written-out repeat—from tonic to flatted mediant at the end. Its second section begins somewhat as a development section would in a sonata form, and then it recapitulates the opening music. In this shortened reprise Schubert remains in the tonic key throughout. The Trio, whose motives and progressions are derived very subtly from those of the Scherzo, has a simplicity and peacefulness about it, much like the mood of the narrator in the first stanza of Schubart's poem ("I stood on the bank and watched in sweet quietude"). This Scherzo and Trio movement clearly exemplifies Schubert's compositional craftsmanship at the age of twenty-two: the structure of the Scherzo section proper, as well as the relationship of the Trio to the Scherzo, reflects a composer destined to be credited by posterity for his inventive formal designs.

"Trout figuration" in the D Major theme-and-variations movement is to be expected. And the listener is not at all disappointed. It is everywhere. A few examples should suffice. In variation 1, not only do the violin, viola, and cello play arpeggiated figures in triplets, but also the piano and later the violin, in a very high register, render a trill figure that is appropriate for suggesting a fish jumping above the water's surface. Variations 4 and 5 bring to mind the narrator's anger at the fisherman and sympathy for the trout as expressed in the third stanza of the song. Variation 4, in the minor mode, thumps out its D Minor chords sternly and has a good number of strident dissonances, including diminished chords. Furthermore, additional trill figures in this section seem to suggest a trout determined to survive. The haunting variation 5, a turn for the cello, which is set in B♭ Major/Minor and their mediant partner D♭ Major, seems to be communicating compassion for the endangered fish, whose motion is omnipresent.[18]

In the finale, marked "Allegro giusto," we can hear the dancing and splashing of a vibrant and lively fish in the transitional music to the clos-

Example 2: Schubert, "Trout" Quintet, fifth movement, mm. 407–18.

ing theme, ushered in by delightfully optimistic ascending arpeggios (mm. 399–406). The closing theme itself allows the violin and the viola to create sprays of motion (as in mm. 407–14), and the references within this triumphant passage to the key-area of F♯ Minor (that is, the regular submediant of A Major—which was also an important key in the slow movement) should not be overlooked, for these references can be taken to mean that joy conquers grief, safety replaces danger, and Life defeats Death in Schubert's quintet. Example 2 provides a glimpse of the music approaching the end of the quintet. Here one can imagine a trout swimming freely, especially because Schubert includes two musical symbols of his fish: the arpeggiated opening curve of the song's vocal line (*sol–do–mi*, in the viola and the violin) and the basic melodic arch of the piano accompaniment in the song's first measure

(that is, the chromatically ascending minor third leaping up a major sixth, in the same two instruments).

As opposed to Schubart's trout, then, Schubert's trout is still swimming about determinedly at the end of the work. In the midst of a section that serves as an epilogue, the trout's music is *fortissimo* and harmonically combative (mm. 449–54). Perhaps not coincidentally, it ascends in triplet eighth-notes exactly twenty-four measures from the final bar, and then it wends its way toward one last peck at the flatted submediant, F Major, before the celebratory final cadences on the tonic A.

Some may say that many of the ideas expressed in this essay are the result of too fanciful an interpretation. This is certainly possible, for we cannot know whether Schubert had any extramusical notions in mind when he wrote the "Trout" Quintet (beyond the use of the song in the fourth movement). The autograph manuscript is lost, and the composer left no clues in his letters. We may, of course, continue to regard it simply as an entertaining work, a divertimento that is somewhat loosely constructed, filled with unbridled, youthful exuberance, and, perhaps, a bit long and repetitious. These observations notwithstanding, it is certainly *not* a superficial composition. As we judge the "Trout," let us give thought to its poetic content, optimistic viewpoint, and unified design. Let us imagine that Schubert may be speaking to us not only about a little fish that wanted only to swim in its brook, but also about Schubert himself, a young composer who wanted only to spend all of his time creating music.[19] I believe that musicians and the public have enjoyed the "Trout" Quintet for almost 190 years not only because of its tunefulness and direct appeal but also because of its passion and compositional coherence. When all is said and done, it is a worthy companion to the great chamber works by Schubert that were yet to come in the 1820s.[20]

Notes

This article is a revised and updated version of a lecture the author was invited to deliver at a meeting of the Greater New York Chapter of the American Musicological Society held at Barnard College, New York City, April 5, 1997.

1. See Lang (1966).

2. See Griffel (1975).

3. The quintet's popularity was most recently indicated in the "Classical Countdown" broadcast by radio station WQXR 96.3 FM, New York City, on December 31, 2005, and January 1, 2006. Among listeners who voted for their favorite classical music compositions, Schubert's "Trout" Quintet ranked twelfth. It was the only composition by Schubert in the top twenty-five, and it was the only work for a chamber music ensemble by any composer in that group.

4. For an argument in favor of 1823, see Bodendorff (2004:204–06). Newbould suggests that

the quintet may have been written either in 1819 or 1825, but he discusses it in his chapter entitled "1818–1822" (1997:166–67).

5. One needs to keep in mind that if the quintet dates from 1819, the fifth version was composed after the quintet. The experience of writing the quintet may have motivated Schubert to add the frisky piano introduction, but the more likely explanation is that Schubert had always played this introduction anyway, whether it was written into the score or not, and that in 1821 he decided to formalize it.

6. This and the following four quotations are taken from Eric Blom's English translation of the documentary biography of Schubert by Otto Erich Deutsch ([1946] 1977:121). German original: "In dem Hause, wo ich wohne, befinden sich 8 Mädchen, beynahe alle hübsch . . . Die Tochter des Herrn v. K[eller], bei dem ich und Vogl täglich speisen, ist sehr hübsch, spielt brav Klavier, und wird verschiedene meiner Lieder singen" (Deutsch 1964:82).

7. See Deutsch ([1946] 1977:124). "Wenn es dir so gut geht, wie mir, so bist du recht gesund . . . In Steyr hab ich mich und werd' mich noch sehr gut unterhalten" (Deutsch 1964:84).

8. See Deutsch ([1946] 1977:93). "Ich lebe und componire wie ein Gott, als wenn es so seyn müsste . . . Ich hoffe, dass ihr alle recht gesund und froh seyd, wie ich es bin. Jetzt lebe ich einmal, Gott sey Dank, es war Zeit, sonst wär' noch ein verdorbener Musikant aus mir geworden" (Deutsch 1964:62–63).

9. See Deutsch ([1946] 1977:103). "Du glücklicher Mensch! Wie sehr ist Dein Los zu beneiden! Du lebst in einer süssen, goldenen Freiheit, kannst Deinem musikalischen Genie vollen Zügel schiessen lassen, kannst Deine Gedanken wie Du willst hinwerfen, wirst geliebt, bewundert und vergöttert . . ." (Deutsch 1964:71).

10. See Deutsch ([1946] 1977:104). "Siehst Du, von allen diesen Dingen bist Du nun frei, bist erlöset, Du siehst und hörst von all diesen Unwesen . . . nichts mehr" (Deutsch 1964:71).

11. See *The New Grove Dictionary of Music*, 2nd ed. (2001), s.v. "Schubart, Christian Friedrich Daniel" (by David Ossenkop).

12. For more about seriousness in Schubart's poem, see Porhansl (1993:69–74).

13. On the Quartet in A Minor, see Temperley (1981:142–54), Raab (1997:85–94), and Rast (2003:81–88). On the "Death and the Maiden" Quartet, see Wolff (1982:143–71) and Kessler (1997:27–33).

14. For an article on the strong musical relationships among the five movements of the quintet, see Marx (1971:588–92).

15. Musical support for the belief that Schubert wrote the quintet during or just after a stay in Steyr, with its magnificent countryside, is provided by the composer's significant use of F Major and D Major in this quintet, the two keys that best represent the pastoral in music.

16. See Kimmel (1980:42–76).

17. For a discussion of the structure of the Andante, as well as its semitonal ascent of keys, see Shamgar (2001:150–69).

18. For a good discussion of this variation movement, see Perry (2002:374–416).

19. Youth sparkled when five young musicians—all of them destined for stardom—came together to make a recording of "The Trout" back in 1969. Hearing and watching a young Daniel Barenboim, Jacqueline DuPre, Zubin Mehta, Itzhak Perlman, and Pinchas Zukerman play the young Schubert's piano quintet is a very gratifying experience. A 2005 DVD of the performance is available on Opus Arte/Allegro Films (OA CN0903 D).

20. When the *Wiener allgemeine Theaterzeitung* on May 21, 1829, announced the first publication of the quintet, its notice mentioned that the musical *savants* who had already heard the work considered it a masterpiece. See Waidelich (1993:527).

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