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Redirecting the Temporal Flow: Brief Meter Changes in German Lieder

ABSTRACT

Background

A brief change of notated meter, usually spanning less than six measures, is a commonly used compositional technique in the nineteenth-century German lieder. At least twenty-one lieder by Schubert, five by Schumann, and twenty-four by Brahms feature an inserted new meter of approximately six measures.

Aims and repertoire studied

My paper provides three categories of such brief meter changes in the lieder by Schubert, Schumann, and Brahms. I investigate each composer's approach to brief meter changes and show how the insertion of new time signature redirects the temporal flow, relates to the text-meaning, and yields flexibility in performance.

Methods

The three categories of meter changes produce distinct effects.

(1) Recitative-like metric fluctuation. Schubert and Brahms often explore this effect but in very different ways. Schubert suggests the recitative style in the notation by a common time signature and the marking 'Recit'. He also obscures the metrical regularity by phenomenal accents such as high notes and agogic accents as defined in Lerdahl and Jackendoff 1983. In fact, almost all of Schubert's songs with brief meter changes involve a common time signature with a marking 'Recit'. Brahms, on the other hand, generates the metrical ebbs and flow by interspersing measures of the new meter with measures of the original meter. He then maps poetic stresses and surprising harmonic changes onto the irregularly spaced metrical accents. Both examples in this category, Schubert's 'Sehnsucht', D. 123 and Brahms's 'Die Spröde', op. 58, no. 3 maintain a clear quadruple hypermeter from the score reader's (or the performer's) perspective, but such hypermetric reading would be rather unsatisfying from the listener's perspective.

The second and third categories differ mainly in duration and context, which has a profound impact on metrical and temporal perception. To illustrate such difference, projective arrows in the manner similar to Hasty 1997, Mirka 2009, and Love 2015 would be adopted.

(2) Rhetorical-lengthening. It occurs at the end or near the end of a phrase and sets the last few syllables of a poetic line. It is most common in Brahms's lieder, although, a few examples are found in Schumann's lieder. Rhetorical-lengthening is the shortest among the three categories, usually about one to two measures long, and the antimetrical events are generally not articulated clearly. Therefore, such lengthening could easily be perceived as a local rhythmic disturbance, like a rhetorical pause, or in William Rothstein's term: a composed-out deceleration (1989). Perceiving such lengthening relies on retrospective analysis upon the return of the original meter. Incidentally, both examples in this category: Schu-

mann's 'Weit, Weit', op. 25, no. 20 and Brahms's 'Der Strom, der neben mir verrauschte', op. 32, no. 4 set the protagonists' questions and the pianos' echoes, as if the piano is dwelling on the protagonists longing and agony while expanding the phrase length by a measure.

(3) Change of perceived tempo. It occurs at a coda or transition and sets one or more poetic lines with three or more measures of new meter. Schumann and Brahms experiment with this meter change. Unlike rhetorical-lengthening, change of perceived tempo is articulated by salient antimetrical events including unexpected accents, changes in note values, changes in declamatory rhythm, text repetitions, motivic parallelism, etc. The two or more readily perceivable antimetrical events would invoke a tentative new metrical structure with a different surface rhythm (Mirka 2009 and Temperley 2009), resulting in a change of perceived tempo (Epstein 1995 and London 2012). The change of perceived tempo in Schumann's 'Sitz ich allein', op. 25, no. 5 and Brahms's 'Mädchenlied', op. 85, no. 3 relies on changes in note values and motivic parallelism. The former paints a drunk protagonist with static harmonic rhythm and motivic repetition; the latter suggests the protagonist's thought drifting away to the far away beloved as the vocal rhythm departs from the rhythm of the piano. In both examples, the new meter keeps the duple hypermeter established earlier in the song but changes the size of the hypermetric beats.

Implications

My study shows that brief meter changes are salient musical events. Among the three composers investigated here, Brahms explores more of the different facets of brief meter changes. Like Schumann, Brahms lengthens phrase ending and changes the perceived tempo by inserting a new time signature, but Brahms uses these compositional techniques more extensively than Schumann. Like Schubert, Brahms generate metric-fluctuation using successive meter changes, but he does so without demarcating declamatory passages from the rest of the song.

In addition to manipulating the listener's temporal experience, notated meter changes pose challenges on performance interpretation—the performers need to realize the notation and to render a personal interpretation. For example, at the meter changes, how does the ensemble keep the tactus? At rhetorical-lengthening, should the ensemble slow down further? At the recitative passage, should the singer intensify the metrical freedom, or render the rhythmic notation faithfully? All these are important questions to consider.

Lastly, meter changes are visual and readily comprehensible. But the fact that it is obvious does not diminish its importance. Stylistic practice in the 19th century does not restrict composers from writing surface rhythm that does not accord with the time signatures. Why, then, do composers insert new time signatures to highlight certain musical and poetic stresses metrically? My hypothesis resonates Schmalfeldt 2016, that score notation is an intimate communication

between the composer and the performer. The score with brief meter changes provides cues for certain declamatory style or highlights certain poetic stresses that could be otherwise overlooked. Recently, music scholars try to integrate the fields of musical analysis and performance. For a full integration, I suggest that one should not neglect or underestimate the expressive effects of obvious features on the score.

Keywords

rhythm and meter, vocal music, musical time

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