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Seeking Schubert in Aribert Reimann's *Mignon*

ABSTRACT

Background

Adaptations, orchestrations, and reworkings of nineteenth-century music by late twentieth and twenty-first century composers pose exciting challenges for musicologists: the complex interactions between musical materials, contexts, and authors old and new often evade existing interpretative frameworks. Since the 1970s, a significant body of such re-imaginings of nineteenth-century Lieder has emerged and continues to expand, while there was a proliferation of Schubert-based compositions in the decade of his bicentenary, the 1990s, by figures such as Luciano Berio, Hans Zender, Hans Werner Henze, and Aribert Reimann.

A glance at Reimann's (b. 1936) oeuvre reveals a propensity for adaptation, both in his extensive use of canonic literary texts, historical and modern, as sources for his vocal and stage works, and in his numerous compositional engagements with the musical past. A notable example is the *Sieben Fragmente für Orchestra im memoriam Robert Schumann* (1988); however, following his orchestration of Schumann's *Sechs Gedichte für die Königin Maria Stuart*, Op. 135 (1988), most of his reworkings have involved nineteenth-century Lieder, and have used the distinctive re-scoring of string quartet and voice. It is a repertoire with which Reimann is intimately acquainted: his career as a collaborative pianist involved extensive performances and recordings of romantic song alongside such esteemed singers as Brigitte Fassbaender and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau. Reimann's versions of Schumann's *Sechs Gesänge* Op. 107 (1994) and of Brahms's five *Ophelia-Lieder* (1997) are relatively straightforward: both leave the order, key, and register of the song sets intact, and reconfigure the piano parts into quartet textures that give a clear impression of the original accompaniment's musical content while subtly incorporating textures and timbres that are removed from nineteenth-century quartet writing. Reimann's voice-quartet adaptations of Schubert (*Mignon*, 1995), Mendelssohn (*...oder soll es Tod bedeuten?*, 1996), and Liszt (*Sieben Lieder,* 2014) are more complicated, each compiling songs that were not linked together by their original composers into through-composed new works; alongside the timbral differences, attention is drawn to the constructed harmonic narratives that emerge through Reimann's positioning and linking of the songs.

Aims and repertoire studied

The Schubert-Reimann *Mignon* is described on its score as a 'compilation and transcription for soprano and string quartet' of four of Schubert's numerous settings of the lyrical songs of Goethe's famously enigmatic character from *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*. The four chosen settings are, in order: 'Sehnsucht' D. 481 ('Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt'),

'Mignon I' D. 726 ('Heiss mich nicht reden'), 'Sehnsucht' D. 310a ('Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt'), and 'Mignon II', D. 727 ('So lasst mich scheinen'). The songs unfold consecutively, each in its original key; Reimann links them with short interludes and bookends the work with a quartet-only introduction and postlude in E major, thus placing the pre-existing songs within a new structural and harmonic narrative. The introductory, closing, and interlude material is largely drawn from another Mignon setting: the harmonically- and texturally-adventurous 'Sehnsucht' D. 656 for male voice quintet. Two surviving fragments of an abandoned 'So lasst mich scheinen', D. 469 — again characterised by unexpected harmonic turns — are also incorporated; unlike the rest of Schubert's material used, these fragments are transposed up a tone in *Mignon*.

Unlike many recent reworkings of Schubert's music that are highly sonically distorted, Reimann preserves most of the basic musical parameters of the original songs, and expands the piano parts into quartet textures that are often plausibly Schubertian. This paper aims to address some of the extensive structural, ontological, and aesthetic questions to which the work's intricate and delicate construction give rise.

The Mignon settings selected by Reimann are not Schubert's most famous, and none are drawn from the cyclic *4 Gesänge aus Wilhelm Meister* (1826, D. 877). Rather, Reimann foregrounds early attempts, abandoned fragments, and versions written for obscure forces — none of which have received widespread attention from the spheres of performance or musicology. For instance, the D. 310 'Sehnsucht' was Schubert's first setting, dating from 1815, of 'Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt — one of the most frequently set texts of romantic song, and one to which he would return six times. It begins in A-flat major, which becomes an unsteady balancing point from which the song veers, variously, into C-flat major and B minor, D-flat major and C-sharp minor. The melodic similarities between the subsequent setting of the same text in 'Sehnsucht' D. 481 (the song positioned first Reimann's *Mignon*) are immediately audible: it follows the same basic rhythmic and melodic contour, but its interval gaps and harmonic leaps are less exaggerated — or, as Graham Johnson put it, 'less hysterical' than Schubert's first teenage effort. I suggest that *Mignon* makes sense of the peculiarities of the D. 310 setting: the song's main key areas, A-flat and C-flat, are (en)harmonically grounded within Reimann's E major, while D. 310's position as the third song of *Mignon* enables the melodic line — exaggeratedly reminiscent of that of the D. 481 'Sehnsucht' — to function as a warped return of the prior song's theme. While songs 1 and 3 are linked by their respective dynamic settings of 'Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt', songs 2 and 4 are rhetorically-similar B minor settings of the lamenting 'Heiss mich nicht reden' and the transcendental 'So lasst mich scheinen', set by Schubert as a pair in 1821 (D. 726

and D. 727); harmonic and affective features of D. 726 are recalled when D. 727 arrives, enacting another structural return that calls to mind principles of both strophic and sonata forms.

Methods

A large portion of this paper will be devoted to suggesting that, as touched upon above, Reimann rehabilitates misunderstood songs and forgotten fragments, shining new light upon them by integrating their particular quirks into the structure of *Mignon*. This is largely achieved through the enactment of typically-Schubertian structural and harmonic traits, including the use of voice-leading sleights-of-hand between triadically-linked key areas, while a delicate interaction between sonata and strophic principles emerges as *Mignon* unfolds.

Mignon is a complex act of Schubert interpretation, its score both a document of reception history and a new work in its own right; Schubert and Mignon are both filtered through Reimann's imagination, re-constituted and presented in quasi-/post-Schubertian guise at the close of the twentieth century. As such, theories of adaptation are employed in my paper alongside music-analytical approaches. I forge links to the long and varied histories of Mignon adaptation and Schubert compilation. In the case of the former, I consider how Reimann's carefully-constructed character portrait of Mignon might contribute to our song-mediated understanding of Goethe's ever-elusive character. For this, I draw upon the work of Lawrence Kramer and Matthew BaileyShea. In terms of Schubert compilation and ideas of work construction and re-construction, I turn to the prominent nineteenth-century precedent found in Liszt's re-ordering and transformations of the constituent parts of his transcriptions of Schubert's *Schwanengesang* and *Winterreise*.

Finally, if time permits, I will briefly consider the practical and poetic implications of the transformation of the songs' piano part. Reimann — formerly a song pianist par excellence — effectively writes out his own role, exploding the supposed intimacy of the voice-piano partnership across five staves; could this be interpreted as a positive reconfiguration of the marginalisation of the accompanist in twentieth-century song performance practice? Matters of genre are implicated too: on one hand, song and string quartet are two of Schubert's celebrated genres, but he never combined them himself; on the other, part songs such as the D. 656 'Sehnsucht' have remained a lesser-known dimension of Schubert's output — the remarkable harmonic and textural features of D. 656 transfer easily into the quartet's four lines, evoking elements of Schubert's late quartet writing.

Implications

It is *Mignon*'s compiled construction that sets it apart from the Schubert reworkings that have attracted the most musicological attention (such as Berio's *Rendering* and Zender's 'composed interpretation' of *Winterreise*). However, in the years since *Mignon* was written, the impulse to compile songs can be traced in orchestrated Schubert sets such as Golijov's *She was here* (2008) and Glanert's *Jahreszeiten* (2008/12). Within the growing disciplinary focus on matters of musical transcription and arrangement, the ontological, formal, and structural concerns of this paper could have a broader reach than *Mignon* alone.

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