HEARING (NOT SEEING) IS BELIEVING: SCHUMANN'S LIED 'AUF EINER BURG'

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Abstract: *Is it because they* see *a blank key signature in the score that various analysts and critics are led to make the (unreasonable) assumption of a general A-minor key? As I* hear *it, this enigmatic and misunderstood lied comes to an end (or to a halt?) in the subdominant region, not in the original tonic of E minor. I will make the case for this open-ended song's being a well-balanced, independent whole, despite the inconclusive character of its tonal plan. My analytical reading relies upon a cognitive theory of harmonic* modulation *— the reinterpretation (or shift in meaning) of any tonal content − I recently formalized. As a seminal concept, 'modulation' denotes a plastic process whereby our musical mind shapes the harmonic tonal space.*

Key words: *music analysis; hermeneutics; lied; harmonic modulation; sub-dominant region.*

1. Introduction

To be sure, the inconclusive tonal plan of Schumann's lied 'Auf einer Burg' from the *Liederkreis*, op. 39 (1840) on poems by Eichendorff is the crux of the problem and the source of unsettled disputes over the meaning of this song as well as the whole cycle's articulation. Seemingly a deviation from the normative monotonal conception of any independent piece, it demands an interpretive stance, a cogent rationale.

Before presenting an alternative analysis, however, two radically different sources of musical scholarship will be brought forth for a broad comparative perspective. They actually differ widely in their scope, purpose, and methodology: Nicholas Cook [1] adopts a perceptual, 'esthesic' approach, whereas Karen Hindenlang [3] adopts a stylistic, 'poietic' approach. Nevertheless, both agree in attributing the fundamental key of A minor to this piece.

Hindenlang takes a comparative stance between poem and music, investigating Eichendorff's writing and the literary scholarship devoted to *Auf einer Burg*, which she acknowledges to be an 'unconventional and problmatic lied'"(p. 569). While her musical analysis is rather meagre and unsubstantial, much is to be gathered from the poetic examination of the song. Particularly, she makes a strong case for the mythological background and the symbolic impact of a folk tale – the legendary Barbarossa – whose essential elements are present in this puzzling lyric.

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Quite different indeed is the way Cook tackled this lied, which he believes to be straightforward, emphasizing rather the way listeners experience music, as opposed to the way it looks in the score. Lacking any reference beyond this individual piece or the musical score, nor even to the poem that preceded and inspired the composer, he tries an admittedly absurd *Ursatz* in A minor, only to promptly dismiss it. He then reaches the conclusion that 'the song is not 'in a key' ... Consequently, 'Auf einer Burg' is not really 'a composition' at all, in the Schenkerian sense' (p. 244).

2. Objectives

This paper attempts to explain otherwise how Schumann's musical interpretation of Eichendorff aptly represents and actually enhances the core meaning of the poem, thereby resorting to a genuine *modulatory* sensitivity expressed in the song's peculiar plagal orientation. This is precisely what stern Schenkerian analysis, stuck with the subdominant region, cannot comprehend structurally, and therefore meaningfully integrate the piece as an artistic whole.

I will argue for an interpretative reading that pictures the core of the song – poetic essence and formal design alike – as a large-scale plastic, modulatory gesture up-on the idiosyncratic leading-tone polarity in minor (5-$^\flat$6-5), another instance of the age-old 'lament motif'. Even the piece's peculiar conception of time is accounted for by a genuine modulatory mind.

This study is intended as a contribution to the literature of interpretive analysis and tonal theory. Particularly, it applies a new cognitive theory of 'harmonic modulation' devised by Ribeiro-Pereira [6] to the issues of tonal structure, musical meaning, and poetic expression in the lied genre.

Developed from the notion of *metabole* – the cornerstone of the first substantial and most influential treatise from classical antiquity, written by Aristoxenus in the 4th

century B.C.E. – the seminal concept of 'modulation' refers here to the *harmonic reinterpretation* (or shift in meaning) *of any continuing content*, be it a single tone or tonal pattern. Both empirically and historically grounded, it is an essentially a plastic process whereby our musical mind shapes the harmonic tonal space.

3. Critical Issues

A preliminary exploration shall address, if only briefly, some fundamental aspects of poetic form and expression in this song, involving matters such as rhyme and stanzaic structure, symbolism and metaphor. We cannot ignore how some particular images of 'Auf einer Burg' were likely to resonate deeply in Schumann's mind, how they urged from him a creative response and were actually translated into a different expressive language: in short, his musical interpretation.

3.1. Poetic form and mood

Eichendorff pictures a broad opposition in 2+2 stanza division of the poem's over-all structure (Fig. 1). Its individual terms may easily be offset, as we compare the moody nature in the contrasting scenes:

Eingeschlafen auf der Lauer
Oben ist der alte Ritter,
Drüben gehen Regenschauer
Und der Wald rauscht durch das Gitter.

Eingewachsen Bart und Haare
Und versteinert Brust und Krause
Sitz er viele hundert Jahre
Oben in der stillen Klause.

Draussen ist es still und friedlich,
Alle sind in's Thal gezogen,
Waldesvögel einsam singen
In der leeren Fensterbogen.

Eine Hochzeit fährt da unten
Auf dem Rhein im Sonnenscheine,
Musikanten spielen munter,
Und die schöne Braut, die weinet.

Fig. 1. *Joseph von Eichendorff's poem 'Auf einer Burg' [An Old Castle]*

'rainstorms shower' 1:3 *vs.* 'all is quiet and peaceful' 3:1; or 'the forest rustles' 1:4 *vs.* 'forest birds sing' 3:3. There is however, a forceful dramatic effect in the first couple of stanzas, as we are originally presented with the portrait of a knight fallen asleep, only to realise that he has long been dead. It is the poet's imaginary vision of a stony statue. Such a narrative metamorphosis is achieved through an anthropomorphic characterisation of the stormy elements of nature which surround and isolate the petrified knight – the symbol of an ancient, suspended past.

By an exquisite semantic modulation upon the qualifier 'still', referring first to the stony silence of death in the cell ('oben in der stillen Klause' 2:4), then to the quietness of the forest outside ('draussen ist es still und friedlich' 3:1), the poet switches to an offsetting symmetry in the latter pair of stanzas. Both the metaphor of natural imagery and its dramatic characters are thoroughly reversed, while the original portrait of the old knight's dark solitude eventually turns into the festive celebration of the young bride's wedding in the sunshine. The poem's overall design is thus shaped as a narrative diptych shifting around the innermost affect conveyed by the word *still*.

Still, despite the shadows of loneliness and emptiness which persist in the latter half (e.g. 'einsam' 3:3; or 'leer' 3:4), we could not reasonably predict the final *coup de théâtre* of the beautiful bride in tears, an unexpected large-scale replica of and much stronger than the dead knight's revelation.

This overall reversed setting is remarkably represented by the use of a cross-shaped literary technique called *chiasmus* (Fig. 2). The outer stanzas are paralleled by the phonological use of a resonant alliteration ('eingeschlafen' 1:1; 'eine Hochzeit' 3:1), while both syntactic order and semantic meaning of their opening distichs are reversed. Such a diametrical opposition refers indeed to fundamental aspects of the narrative: the characters involved (the old knight *vs.* the young bride) and the staged scenery (a castle sitting atop the mountain *vs.* a party sailing down the river).

Now, Schumann's setting of the poem preserves intact – even reinforces – the two-stanza grouping, blending the whole into a single musical unit: the sentence-like phrase structure. Conversely, he totally ignores – even denies – the effect of two contrasting scenes, assigning the whole piece an identical *Stimmung* and a parallel structure: the strophic form. If the quiet denotation of the word *still* was the pivot of the poem's overall design, its inward resonance is to become the music's sole *Affekt*. Only the sombre mood of the very beginning and its atmosphere of timelessness prevail, thereby casting a new light on the words of the second strophe and betraying the poet's final surprise of the unhappy wedding. The characteristic impression of such an intriguing, unresolved ending is still maintained, nonetheless, by way of an idiosyncratic half-cadential arrival in the subdominant key region.
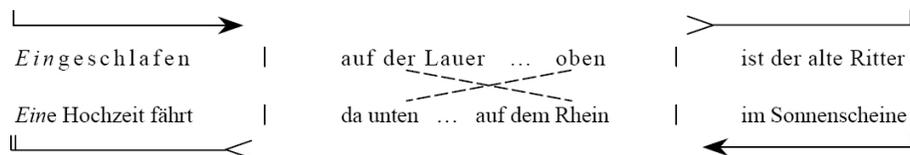

Fig. 2. *Poem's alliteration and chiasmus in the outer stanzas (1:1-2, 4:1-2)*

The collage of Figure 3 telescopes the original thematic phrase and its *modulatory* outcome, the first strophe's climax. We can thus correlate the metamorphic development of dramatic character and musical subject. Such a meaningful formal design is actually accomplished by modulating the theme's original pitch *content*: i.e. providing the same melodic image with a different harmonic *context*. Because this modulatory climax underscores the poetic *dénouement* at the end of each strophe, the undisturbed stillness of a dead but memorable past (the old knight's presence) is subtly correlated with the quiet weeping of a promising but painful future (the young bride's image). Accordingly, the musical rhyme binds together the dual outcome of the whole poem and its axial conception of stillness.

A large-scale dramatic transfiguration is likewise promoted by the extended arrival on a V^{4-3} suspension (with lower neighbour at the very end), a conspicuous stylistic reference that vividly recalls the church music of Palestrina or J. S. Bach. Cast at the end of each strophe, this aura of sacred music conveys first a respectful fervour for the past, then the religious character of a marriage ceremony. By the same token, the wedding procession may be associated with the premonition of a funeral march.

3.2. Stylistic references

The imposing image of a venerable, ancestral past is responsible for a set of other stylistic and compositional devices that Schumann adopted in this song. The peculiar handling of a minor key with no clear overall articulation on the dominant, but instead an emphatic stress on (and orientation toward) the subdominant; the consistent, almost exclusive use of triadic harmony in root position; the sole parallel phrasing by harmonic sequence, based on the motivic onset of a medieval flavoured open fifth; the theme's hexachordal range, avoiding precisely the definitive leading tone (D sharp is altogether excluded from the vocal melody throughout); the contrapuntal treatment of the theme's original presentation and complex elaboration; the slow pace of a perceived *a cappella* 2/2 time signature (metrically equivalent to an *alla breve*) and the steady motive of a dotted rhythm; even the archaic notation of the E-minor key signature as a transposed Aeolian mode, which would require F sharp over the vocal and continuo lines in Baroque musical scores – indeed all these features pay homage to an authoritative past represented by an old castle on the Rhine, one of the most powerful symbols of 19th-century German Romanticism.

Fig. 3. *Large-scale modulation of both poetic narrative and motivic content*

4. Analytical Discussion

I now shall offer an alternative analysis of Schumann's *Auf einer Burg*. This is an open-ended piece, I strongly argue, not off-headed; it is in E minor, not in A minor. Particularly, the climactic dissonant event and the overall inconclusive arrival in the subdominant region (hence the meaning of the piece as a whole) must be interpreted from a plastic, modulatory standpoint.

4.1. Thematic character

The thematic scaffolding of the song is the arpeggiated tonic on the downbeats of bars 1-4, defining the basic shape of an *inverted arch* (Fig. 4). Two motifs can be clearly perceived, whose contour seems to express a particular meaning of the poetic content: 'eingeschlafen' is conveyed by a falling open-fifth (*b'-e'*), whereas 'auf der Lauer', by a rising stepwise third (*e'-f#'-g'*). Such a plastic, isomorphic character is presented at the outset in a static, restful environment – the sole tonic harmony. The individuality of these melodic motifs is further asserted through their being contrapuntally combined (in contrary motion) in the piano accompaniment. Together, they constitute a formal unit: the two-bar subphrase correlated to one poetic line.

Now, bars 3-4 may also be heard as an inverted structure of bars 1-2: the original inward impulse of a headmotivic fifth, leaping down from a metrically accented 5/i, is mirrored by the yearning rise of a fourth up to 6/iv[7], forcefully accented by register and dissonant harmony. Again, the poetic text seems to find a symbolic correspondence in the music's profile, for the whole theme reaches its peak upon 'oben ist'. Once again, there is a complementary tailmotivic third leading to a metrically weak 3/i, first approached upwards by step in bar 2, then downwards by leap in bar 4.

The inversional balance of the whole is enhanced by the metrical context of each initiative impulse, for the opening *b'* falls on the beat, whereas the climactic *c''*, off beat. Since the latter will lead back to an accented *b'* over V, the theme is framed by the modulated return of the metrically accented scale degree 5. The upbeat *c''* is therefore perceived as an overall semitone inflection $5-{}^{b}6-5$, metrically unstable and cast upon the sole dissonant iv[7] chord (Fig. 5). Moreover, the prominent degree 5 – a sort of isolated *Kopfton* – does not lead by step to the cadential, metrically weak arrival on 3/i. The four-bar phrase, then, does not accomplish a sense of definite closure: lingering on scale degree 5, the theme seems to remain suspended.
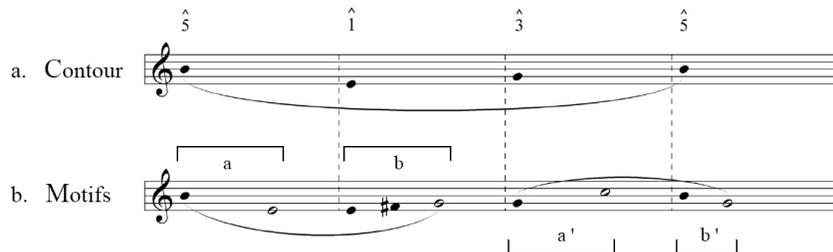

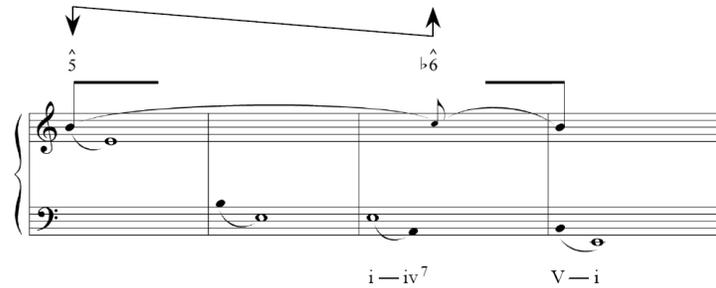Fig. 4. *Motivic analysis of the theme (bars 1-4)*

Fig. 5. *Melodic profile of the theme (bars 1-4)*

Indisputably, the crux of the theme lies in the climactic dissonance of bar 3. This unique event is dramatically enhanced as the theme's purposeful *dissonant goal*, acquiring a truly ecstatic character. The lofty image of the old knight has thus been carefully crafted at the apex of the whole shapely design (a concave melodic line of a primarily inward nature) over a dissonant plagal harmony. No longer displayed in the corresponding bar 7 of the counterstatement, the dissonance upon the high *c''* will be recaptured for the strophe's climactic outcome in bar 14. Now in order to deepen our understanding of the strophe's overall plastic design – truly a modulatory drama – we ought to examine more closely the large-scale relationship of the dual climax upon the vocal C.

4.2. Formal design

Let us first consider the dual tetrachordal ascent in the next developing sequence of bars 8-17 (Fig. 6). Not only does the vocal melody recapture and resolve the climactic semitone polarity through a process akin to Leonard B. Meyer's [5] gap-fill melodies, filling in the dual gap of the theme's motifs by rising fourth (*g'-a'-b'-c''*) and falling third (*b'-a'-g#'*). Also, the linear ascent in the bass, consistently offbeat and echoed at the upper octave, foreshadows a similar tetrachordal path (C–D–E–F) that leads into the overlapping recapitulation of the piano postlude in the subdominant region of A minor. In truly set-analytical fashion, this tetrachordal content develops into the cluster sonority of the climactic bar 14
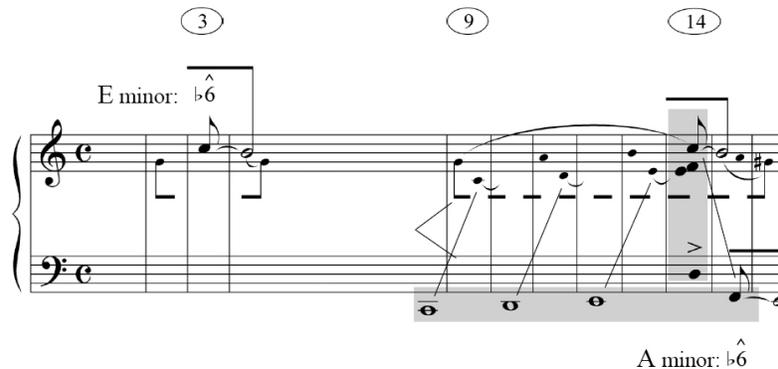
Fig. 6. *Tetrachordal ascent of the developing sequence (bars 8-15)*

(C/D/E/F), enhanced by a unique dynamic stress and textural change – much like the theme's own climax in bar 3.

Figure 7 represents the strophe's overall contrapuntal-modulatory design, outlining an inverted arch-form. This conception actually associates the evolving harmonic status of degree $^\flat$6 (the plastic vicissitudes of the note C) with a particular musical narrative: the climactic peaks are forceful plagal (iv) dissonances neighbouring an essentially static and unresolved headtone, whereas the lowest inner point ensures a most stable root in major supported by the deep acoustical resonance in the piano. Framed within the range of the middle octave, the voice's concave profile (*c''-c'-c''*) spans the outer peaks of the strophe through a hollow right at its core, in bar 9, whereupon the contrapuntal patterns of voice and piano are split in register and kept out of phase. Henceforth the middle C is sustained throughout as an enduring and harmonically ever-undermined pedal tone, eventually disintegrating only to rejoin the voice at its most dissonant peak: a striking modulatory outcome.

Such a climactic sonority in bar 14 is undoubtedly the focal point of the whole strophe, just as was its counterpart in bar 3 for the original theme. Its most distinctive dissonant nature is deliberately crafted by the composer – *sciens et volens* – as the song's mutual, modulatory crux. A similar offbeat dissonance is struck upon the very same melodic peak and carried out by an identical plagal inflection (iv^7). Also, the previous contrapuntal activity yields again to a chorale-like texture. This large-scale return appears to have a strong mnemonic effect, induced by the musical image of a suspended sonority on the $^\flat$6 secondary leading-tone inflection in minor. Slowly, dissonance builds into the final developing sequence of bars 9-14, which fosters the overall modulatory climax – whereupon a conspicuous moment from the past will be dramatically recaptured.

The inverted arch-form of the overall Gestalt, spanning inwardly an opening that is meant to remain suspended, therefore comes to express a meaningful formal design. Just as was the case with the dual climax – the theme's and the strophe's –

Fig. 7. *Strophe's overall contrapuntal-modulatory design*

the overall shape of the strophe is actually a structural amplification of the theme's original shape. Figure 8 further shows how the former harmonic inflection to the subdominant is formally expanded to become a key-region orientation. Remaining yet incomplete, with a sole plagal inflection (i—VI—iv), the tonal cycle is suspended on a climactic half-cadential arrival in the subdominant key region.

Symptomatically, a similar poetic image will match this encompassing modulatory replica. The toponym 'oben' returns and is newly correlated with the formal dissonant peak: the locative reference now triggers the dramatic *dénouement*, as the ecstatic image of the centennial knight is finally revealed ('sitz er viele hundert Jahre, oben in der stillen Klause'), whom the climactic music seems to portray as a martyr up on the altar to be venerated. The song's modulatory crux is therefore also the knight's symbolic cross – an exquisite narrative transfiguration of both musical and poetic theme, whose trailing development has a hallucinatory effect comparable to the cinematographic technique of a dream-slow close-up, scrutinizing a detail until it takes up the whole screen.

4.3. Rhythm and meter

Genuinely imaginary, this visual effect operated by the song is an apt metaphor to what is essentially an experience of time. To round off the discussion, let us see one critical aspect of its temporal organization.

On the large-scale rhythmic design, we can actually perceive a gradual decrease in tempo (or implied time signature) of the flow of musical events, as the harmonic pace slows down from an original half-note 'tactus' (2/2 in bars 1-8) to a whole-note (2/1 in bars 9-14) and eventually to a breve (4/1 in bars 15-18). The second half of the strophe (the developing sequence), comprising one musical phrase and one poetic stanza, is indeed a single rhythmic unit shaped as a contrapuntal augmentation of the original theme (Fig. 9). Displaying a remarkable approximation, the proportions that pace the events in the thematic phrase are kept in functional correspondence with those of the sequential elaboration, though first in 1:2 and then in 1:4 ratio. Of course, the theme's first arpeggiation (*b'–g'*) will be reversed by the developing sequence's path (*g'-a'-b'*), that is meant to recapture the static, suspended axis on 5. Particularly striking is the hypermetrical coincidence of the correlated offbeat climaxes upon scale degree ^{b}6, while the ultimate half-cadential extension sounds like an echo dying away (a written *morendo*).

Also, lacking a structural downbeat, the hypermetrical analysis corroborates that *suspended*, quasi-floating quality of this song, already observed with regard to both its overall Gestalt and peculiar tonal plan. A final investigation of the song as a *whole* is still quite revealing: its basic moves are accounted for, with considerable accuracy and precision, by the natural proportions of the Golden Mean.
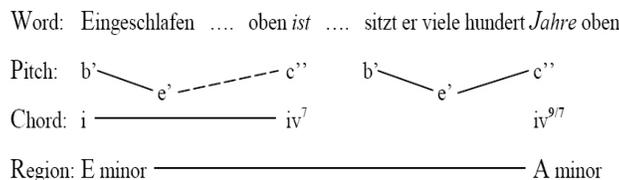
Word: Eingeschlafen …. oben *ist* …. sitzt er viele hundert *Jahre* oben

Pitch: b'⟍   c''   b'⟍   c''
            e' ⎯ ⎯ ⎯   e'

Chord: i ⎯⎯⎯⎯ iv^7 iv$^{9/7}$

Region: E minor ⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯ A minor

Fig. 8. *Telescoping words and music upon the climactic scale degree ^{b}6*

a. Theme, mm. 1-4

b. Developing sequence,
    mm. 9-18

Fig. 9. *Comparative phrase structure of theme and developing sequence*

5. Open-Ended Song: Is It a Piece in Itself?

Having examined the fundamental issues – critical as well as analytical [1] – we may confidently sustain that 'Auf einer Burg', despite the inconclusive character of its tonal plan, is a *well-balanced*, *independent* whole. To conclude, therefore, I ought to elucidate the meaning of these qualifiers: well-balanced and independent.

By 'well balanced' I mean an aesthetically satisfying integration of both poetic and musical elements, truly a whole of artistic expression, rather than the plain notion of harmonic counterbalance or offset (e.g. subdominant *vs.* dominant), which thus would come to restore tonal stability. The idiosyncratic character of 'Auf einer Burg' lies precisely in this radical, one-sided nature of its plagal orientation: it favours a single, deeply melancholic mood, stemming from the poet's obsessive vision of the old knight with awe. Schumann's modulatory sensitivity has accomplished such a vehement expression, by way of a peculiar strophic Gestalt which develops inwardly within the frame of two suspended peaks, correlating poetic essence and musical mood, dramatic plot and formal design. Fostered by such an isomorphic gesture, a large-scale modulatory drama recasts the original climactic polarity upon degrees 5-^{b}6-5 over a definitive, more forceful subdominant shift. The theme's dissonant crux

therefore grows to acquire an ecstatic (and aesthetic) dimension.

Now, if 'Auf einer Burg' is to be considered an *independent* piece – how could it be otherwise, if we readily understand the work as a cycle? – what could possibly be the self-reliant meaning of each strophe and the irregular plan of the whole? Indeed the piano recap in the subdominant region (a wordless, dream-like episode of innermost character) no longer echoes the voice at the end. Let us first see the vocal strophe alone, which will remain unchanged in the repetition. Insofar as the music is monothematic, its formal segmentation ought to be established according to criteria such as wide tonal orientation and texture, phrase structure and rhythm, motivic and poetic content. A brief inspection will suffice to disclose an unmistakable AA'B *bar form*, with the basic proportion 1+1+2. Symbol of the older German Meistersinger and much praised by 19th-century Romantic nationalism, the emblematic meaning of this structure seems to charge the song, portraying ancestral myths, with a surplus of emotional expression.

Imbued with the spirit of his forebears, it seems, the Romantic bard wanders through dreamy regions, which are the patrimony of poets. He is mesmerized by the vision of the petrified knight (that solitary guardian and silent witness from time immemorial), overwhelmed by its oppressive immobility. Gazing up to the old castle, he stands in

awe of the knight. Around him the seasons go by, and winter storms will give place to spring celebrations, while the Rhine flows endlessly down on the valley. This is essentially a unique experience of time: past and future are represented by the dramatic characters of the old knight and the young bride, conflating in the very present — an ecstatic, extended moment.

The sole instrumental recap in the first strophe is therefore in the right place, quietly resonating after the poetic winter picture. More than a mere subdominant inflection, characteristic of a coda, it fully transposes the original theme in that plagal key region. Such an echo of the petrified knight, vividly impressed upon our mind, has the exquisite effect of a voice from afar, a deadly resonance of the past, a deeply nostalgic solitude. In the second strophe, however, the characters will no longer require this elegiac postlude, even though the music conveys the same everlasting impression. The inconclusive half cadence leads instead into the following song, 'In der Fremde', motivically as well as textually akin to 'Auf einer Burg' – its overlapping subdominant inflection.

In spite of this fitting cyclic articulation, no hint of harmonic conclusion is actually necessary for 'Auf einer Burg' to live up to its status of an independent, self-reliant artistic expression. Is it not more revealing than surprising, after all, that Schumann originally intended it for his *Eichendorff-Lieder* to come to an end – or to a halt? [4]

6. Epilogue

Meaning in art lives only in our 'reading' (i.e. interpretive) experience of an artwork. 'Reading with understanding' says Hans-Georg Gadamer [2], 'is always a kind of reproduction, performance, and interpretation' (p. 160). May this analytical reading illuminate, influence, or even inspire some listeners or musicians – performers, composers, and theorists alike – in their own interpretation of Schumann's lied.

Note

[1]Due to the limited space available here, neither the musical score nor an English translation of the poem could be provided. The former is required, of course, for the reader to fully appreciate the analytical essay.

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