Robert Schumann’s *Frauenliebe und Leben*

*Undated drawing of Robert Schumann. Source: AP Images*

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In 2004, the *New York Times* published an article naming the classical-music critics’ favorite works of Robert Schumann. The list included works such as *Dichterliebe*, “Papillons,” as well as his Piano Trio No. 1.\(^1\) Nowhere in this article was any mention of one of Schumann’s other song cycles, *Frauenliebe und Leben* (A Woman’s Life and Love). There is a historical tendency to dismiss *Frauenliebe*, as if it is any less significant. Many scoff at its uninteresting key relationships and paltry verses by Adelbert Von Chamisso, whom Jack Stein refers to in his book *Poem and Music of the German Lied* as a “truly second-rate poet.”\(^2\) And yet, the song cycle has not been removed from standard repertory since its composition in 1840.\(^3\) It continues to be popular even to this day, as a favorite of both amateurs and professionals. Something, then, has to explain its popularity since its composition. Could there exist a deeper layer of meaning that, only after careful examination, can be found? The answer to this, by many who have discovered the beauty of *Frauenliebe und Leben*, is a resounding yes.

**What was Schumann’s reason(s) for selecting *Frauenliebe***?

On the surface, the claims of those who scoff at *Frauenliebe* seem to be true. The lyrics pale significantly in comparison to other literary works that Schumann selected. Chamisso wrote *Frauenliebe und leben* in 1830, ten years before Schumann set the text. The majority of Chamisso’s literary works discuss melancholy and depressing topics. For

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example, the novel he wrote in 1812, Peter Schlemihl, is about a man who sells his shadow to the devil in exchange for money. Obviously Frauenliebe is overall a happier and lighter song cycle, but there are occasional glimpses of satire and melancholy. Each of the eight poems is centered around a specific and important event in a woman’s life, beginning with love at first sight in “Seit ich ihn gesehen,” to marriage in “Helft mir, ihr Schwestern,” to pregnancy in “Süsser Freund,” to the man’s death in the last poem, “Nun hast du mir.”

We find most of the sadness in the final poem, when our female narrator exclaims “Geliebet hab’ ich und gelebt, ich bin nicht lebend mehr! (I loved you and for you alone I lived, and now my life is lost!)” One would assume that because of these major life changes, that our female narrator would exhibit some growth or change throughout the cycle. On the contrary, she remains the same devotional and submissive woman from the beginning to end. This static behavior and lack of internal growth is what many critics find most disturbing about Frauenliebe. Between Chamisso and his other European contemporaries, there is a stark contrast between the drama and passion of the Romantic Era—a style in which almost all of his contemporaries were writing in- and Chamisso’s uncomplicated text is what causes the poem cycle to stand out. While the lyrics themselves are not particularly intricate, “they show an amazing empathy, each of them being a believable expression of the moment it portrays.” This empathy is what lends the poems so easily to musical composition. Chamisso knew how to capture an emotion with such precise words, that no other extraneous words were needed. This uncomplicated text is most likely exactly what Schumann was looking for.

5 Stein, Poem and Music of German Lied, 119.
Historical Context and Discussion of Other Works Written at this Time:

Frauenliebe’s composition took place in 1840, the year of Schumann’s Liederjahr, or year of song. During this time, Schumann was in a long and caustic legal battle against his teacher, Friedrich Wieck, for the hand of his daughter Clara. There is no doubt that the burden of this courtship and finally the consummation of it was the primary cause for Schumann’s immense output of Lieder during this time. Of course Frauenliebe was not the only poetic work that he musically embellished; in the span of his career, Schumann musically set verse by approximately sixty writers. During his year of song, Schumann composed several major song cycles. In mid February of 1840 Schumann wrote Liederdreis, based off of a poetic cycle of Heinrich Heine. Schumann’s songwriting was interrupted, however, when Franz Liszt visited him during a concert tour in Germany in March of 1840. The two were enthralled with each other’s work, and Schumann went to great lengths to make Liszt comfortable during his stay. This made Clara jealous, both personally and professionally. In 1840, Liszt was at his peak performance; thousands demanded tickets to his performances, and his audiences were welcoming and receptive, giving rousing applause after each show. Clara was not having the same success during her tour North Germany. She found the audiences she played for to be cold and unwelcoming. She sent letters to Schuman complaining of her unhappiness, and was suspicious that Schumann was enjoying the lively company of Liszt a little too much. But Robert replied to her letters, saying that “Liszt’s world is no longer my world…I wouldn’t exchange

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beautiful comfort of composing) for all of his glamour.”⁹ After Liszt’s departure in April of 1840, things settled down once again, and Schumann resumed his compositions. In early May, he set certain texts from Eichendorff’s novellas *Aus dem Leben eines Taugenichts* and *Ahnung und Gegenwart*, and titled the work *Liederkreis*.¹⁰ Schumann wrote his most famous vocal work, *Dichterliebe*, with text from Heine’s “Lyriche Intermezzo” of Heine’s *Buch der Lieder* in mid May of that same year. Following that, he wrote *Frauenliebe* in mid-July, a little after his birthday. Clara had been on tour in previous years, and had not been able to join Schumann for his birthday, but decided to be with him that year instead of giving concerts in Russia.¹¹ It is possible that their reunion, with life returning to that of a normal couple inspired Schumann to set *Frauenliebe*. Between July and August of 1840 Schumann set six texts by Reinick, and titled it *Sechs Gedichte*. Finally, between November and January of 1841 Schumann set two texts and titled them both *Zwölf Gedichte*, one contained works by Kerner, the other by Rückert.

There seems to be a dichotomy in the attitudes of the poetry that Schumann was attracted to. On one hand, Schumann seemed to be attracted to romantically mysterious verse, such as the “distraught lover” of his songs by Heine in the song cycle *Dichterliebe*, or his settings of poems by Joseph Freiherr von Eichendorff.¹² On the other hand, Schumann clearly shows interest in German middle-class domestic values, which we can see in his collaboration with Clara on the poems of Friedrich Rückert, *Zwölf Gedichte*, and of course through Chamisso’s *Frauenliebe*. While the poems of Chamisso and Rückert aren’t necessarily full of passion or overtly romantic, the characters in the poems do find meaning in love.

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¹⁰ Hallmark, *German Lieder*, 83.
¹² Hallmark, *German Lieder*, 79.
Gender Roles

One of the things that comes to mind when discussing and examining *Frauenliebe* is the unique juxtaposition of gender roles found in Schumann’s setting of the cycle. Placed in its original context, *Frauenliebe* can be considered a very feminist text. Schumann chose instead to alter the text to highlight the submissive features of the woman and does away with key phrases that, without them, completely change the meaning of the text. The most notable of these changes is the omission of Chamisso’s last poem, “Traum der eignen Tage (Dream of My Own Days).” The final poem occurs many years after “Nun hast du mir.” The narrator, now a grandmother, is speaking to her granddaughter on her wedding day. She reflects on her own life and love, and at the end of the song affirms that love, in spite of all its sufferings and pain one may experience because of it, is in fact the highest good. By choosing not to set the final poem, when the woman’s husband dies, her whole world dies with her, never mind the existence of their child. There is no continuity, no daughter to raise, no granddaughter to impart on the words of wisdom. In fact, we never learn that the child is female in Schumann’s setting of the song cycle. On the contrary, we are led to believe that the child is a boy by the repetition of the words “*dein Bildness*” (your image) at the end of *Süsser Freund* (see Example (Ex.) 1).
Example 1: Robert Schumann, “Süsser Freund,” mm. 52-58

Also eliminated was the third verse in which the mother is mentioned in *Süsser Freund*.

Hab’ ob manchen Zeichen  
Mutter schon gefragt,  
Hat die gute Mutter  
Alles mir gesagt,  
Hat mich unterwiesen  
Wie, nach allem Schein,  
Bald für eine Wiege  
Muß gesorget sein.

About the signs  
I have already asked Mother;  
my good mother has  
told me everything.  
She has assured me that  
by all appearances,  
soon a cradle  
will be needed.

In the stanza, the narrator goes to consult with her mother about the signs of pregnancy. The way Schumann sets it, she instead simply idolizes the man who impregnated her, further emphasizing the weak, starry-eyed character that Schumann has created.\(^{13}\)

In its original form, *Frauenliebe* presents a woman of the time, who ultimately learns the beauty of love through joys of marriage, motherhood, and loss, and then

https://etd.ohiolink.edu/ap/10?0::NO:10:P10_ACCESSION_NUM:akron1247788301

Bavari
imparts this knowledge on the next generation. The character that we are presented with is submissive and weak, not at all what one could imagine Chamisso originally had intended. Why then, did Schumann make such deliberate changes to this text? One could argue that this was his creation for his “little wife at home,” everything that Clara Schumann was not. In a commentary with John C. Tibbetts, Nancy B. Reich speculates that Schumann was jealous of Clara’s immense success as a concert pianist. “Like all husbands who are proud of the work their wives do, Robert had moments when he resented the fact that it interfered occasionally with his own work.”\(^\text{14}\) It is possible that since Clara was doing the more manly things of that time (read: making most of the money), that this caused Schumann to think about what life would be like if he and Clara had switched roles: he, the breadwinner, she, the humble, submissive wife.

Although *Frauenliebe* was written before the two were married, the cycle is very accurate in its description of Robert’s personal life. In many ways, Robert and Clara’s gender roles were reversed. When one thinks of a stay at home father, it is thought of as a more modern concept. It certainly would not extend back to the time of the great Romantic composers, and would certainly not associate any such concept with someone as great as Schumann. Though not thought of in those terms, that is, more or less, what Schumann was: a stay-at home father. There is something to be said about his unique motherly attitude towards his children. To say that Schumann knew about and understood what it meant to be a mother is an understatement, as he was his children’s mother and father while Clara was away. “In many ways, for his time Robert Schumann was a remarkably sensitive husband and father.”\(^\text{15}\) He kept all of the household records and

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\(^{15}\) Tibbetts, *Schumann: A Chorus*, 142.
expenses, nurtured the children, and enjoyed spending time with them. Out of the two, Robert was by far the more emotionally capable, and such can be seen by his selection of Frauenliebe. By selecting Frauenliebe, Schumann “responded fully to the unembarrassed emotionalism…the glorification of the homely and domestic.” 16 Again, although Frauenliebe was written before the two were married, Schumann may have instead envisioned the life that he himself wanted to have, as a more maternal figure to his future children. It also describes his own feelings for Clara, from being “blind” the first moment he saw her, to wishing the children looked like her (which would then explain the repetition of the text “dein Bildness”). The Ringelein on Schumann’s proverbial finger would remind him of his own devotion to Clara when she was touring, or he far away. In terms of the last song, “Nun hast du mir,” Schumann’s interpretation of the text may have had more of a romantic connotation, that he couldn’t go on without her. Setting the text in this fashion would also explain his choice not to set “Traum der eignen Tag.”

**Relationship Between Piano Accompaniment and Voice**

Something that one must keep in mind when examining a vocal work by Schumann is that he was, first and foremost, a pianist. In fact, Schumann did not begin writing vocal works until much later in his career, most of which he wrote during his Liederjahr. It is important then, that one take a close look at the piano accompaniment for his vocal works. In Frauenliebe, the piano accompaniment plays an integral part in the overall context of the song cycle, and is used for different effects in each song. In “Seit ich ihn gesehen,” the piano “commentary” between each strophe as well as the false return to the beginning in the postlude creates a wonderful sense of cohesion throughout.

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16 Stein, *Poem and Music in the German Lied*, 120.
the Lied. In addition, the piano adds a small layer of tension, particularly on the words “tiefstem” and “ihn”, in which the vocalist has a leap of a seventh. The piano creates tension, followed by resolution by moving to C natural while the singer is holding D natural, then resolving in the final beat. In “Er, der Herrlichste von allen,” the piano provides immediate aid. The mood of the song is completely different from “Seit ich ihn gesehen,” and provides the singer with two brief melodic phrases that help the singer to transition from a more pensive to lively state.

“Er, der Herrlichste von allen” tends to become redundant. In order to prevent this, Schumann adds *rubato* in the piano during the singer’s melodic turnabouts (Ex. 2).

Example 2: Robert Schumann, “Er, der Herrlichste von allen”, m. 4

![Example 2: Robert Schumann, “Er, der Herrlichste von allen”, m. 4](image)

“Ich kanns nicht fassen, nicht glauben” is often incorrectly interpreted. The opening phrase is usually turned into an “internalized whisper,” but in fact it should be declared with passion and intense emotion as the marking *mit Leidenschaft* (with passion) suggests. “Vehement emotion is what [Schumann] asked for, and that is what he should

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be given.”¹⁹ “Du Ring an meinem Finger” is another of this cycle that is often misinterpreted. The tempo indication *innig* directly translates to intimate, or heartfelt. This piece is often taken much slower, and so there must be a collaborative effort between the accompanist and vocalist to keep the tempo moving in this piece. Right at the very beginning of “Helft mir ihr Schwestern,” the arpeggios in the piano are used to create excitement (Ex. 3).


In “An meinem Herzen, an meinem Brust”, Miller is adamant that the seventh chords in the piano part should be “struck cleanly, not rolled.”²⁰ One of the most important roles of the piano, however, is found in the postlude of “Nun hast du mir”. In the postlude, Schumann managed to combine the beauty of the music and the intensity of the singer’s last words with only the piano, highlighting the importance of the piano throughout the song cycle. “The singer and pianist are still singing, although it is the pianist who now does so for both performers.”²¹ The removal of the voice from the postlude in “Nun hast du mir” is an insightful tactic of Schumann. On the surface, the

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²⁰ Miller, *Singing Schumann*, 93.
²¹ Miller, *Singing Schumann*, 94.
singer chooses to withdraw within herself, as most women of the time would do. On a psychologically deeper basis, she is forced, along with the audience to rehear the music, and subject herself to the truth of the words she has just sung. It is a unique example of how music can be cognitively rich without obvious indication, and how music can support and subvert ordinary, speakable text.

**Examining Patterns**

If Schumann was referring to his and Clara’s relationship at all in *Frauenliebe*, it is perhaps because their own relationship was so different from the societal norm at that time that he either longed for normalcy or saw the rest of the world’s relationships as dull and conventional, and his own as something much more special. Martin Bresnick writes in his essay “Convention and the Hermetic in Schumann’s “Frauenliebe und Leben” ” that Schumann chose to set the text this way intentionally to highlight the simplistic nature of the text. “Schumann took great pains in *Frauenliebe* to represent the musical world of bourgeois relationships as harmonious and orderly, if ultimately tragic.”

On the surface, we could easily interpret the final song in the cycle to be the ultimate tragedy. There is, however, another deeper layer to the work. On this level, the conventional joys of *Frauenliebe* mesh with darker realities, ultimately leading to the eternal paradox of death. When this conventional layer blends correctly with a level that is dark and abstruse, it brings out a certain richness in *Frauenliebe*. While there are no ciphers in *Frauenliebe*, Schumann did weave in several ghost-like clues and patterns. The first is an ascending or descending chromatic motif, usually lasting no more than three notes. This pattern, referred to by Bresnick as pattern X, is typically found in the piano

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accompaniment, but does appear at several points in the voice part. The second pattern, referred to by Bresnick as pattern Y, is an exchange of voices that passes through a common pitch. Usually, this pattern is executed using a dotted rhythm. The last pattern, referred to by Bresnick as pattern Z, is a sequential three-note scale, either ascending or descending, and occurs either before or after a leap of a perfect fourth or fifth. These musical patterns are not to be confused with Berlioz’s *idée fixe*. They do not necessarily associate themselves with any given person, word, or idea, nor do they develop through any means of variation. While the text itself and the primary melodies may be consonant and conventional, the chromatic patterns heighten the sense of convention as synthetic construction as opposed to natural. “In this way, Schumann allows the familiar to remain familiar while creating a strange-even haunted-context in which to perceive it.”

In order to keep material new, Schumann makes small alterations to each of the strophes so that it remains familiar, but not an exact replica of previous material. Schumann’s adroit execution of this technique is visible in several places throughout the cycle. In “Seit Ich Ihn”, all three patterns are found in a tight tangle from mm. 2-4 (Ex. 4).

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23 Bresnick, *Convention*, 175.
Example 4: Robert Schumann, “Seit ich ihn gesehen,” mm. 2-4

*Blue indicates Y pattern, red indicates Z pattern, yellow-green indicates X pattern.

In “Er, der Herrlichste” there is a manipulation of patterns X, Y, and Z. Pattern X can be seen as part of the bass line at the beginning of each strophe (Ex. 5).

In “Du Ring an meinem Finger,” there is a simultaneous X pattern in both the vocal line as well as the accompaniment in the fourth measure on the word “Ringelein” (Ex. 8). The sixth song, “Süsser Freund,” is full of these three patterns. The piano’s opening includes two X patterns: a descending line from D to C-sharp to C to B, which is then answered by an ascending line from A-sharp to B. Always keen to avoid the obvious, Schumann chooses not to place an obvious Y pattern at the beginning of measure 9, but chooses instead to employ a hemiola, which begins off the beat from the chordal accompaniment. The final song, “Nun hast du mir,” is equally saturated with the three patterns. The piano accompaniment is rife with variations of the Y pattern voice exchanges. The vocal mainly employs the X and Z patterns.

Since Schumann never reveals specific connotations for the three patterns, his placement of the three patterns poses a challenge to any simple understanding of the song cycle. The composer’s intricate compositional plan suggests that conventional sentiments of a restless, autonomous female subject suppressed, simply cannot be contained through either music or text.

**Conclusion**

While the suggestion made by the composer may be true, the suggestion made by many music critics that *Frauenliebe und Leben* is by any means a second-rate work is, in a word, balderdash. This combination of music set to a simplistically powerful text results in a beautiful song cycle that is, without question, underappreciated by those who do not have the ears to perceive it.

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Bibliography

Books:


Miller, Richard. *Singing Schumann*. New York: Oxford Press, 1999. Obtained from the private library of Dr. Leneida Crawford, Towson University. Provides interpretive performance information for several of Schumann’s works, including *Frauenliebe und-Leben*. This book is an excellent resource for vocalists looking to perform a work of Schumann as close to how he intended the work to be performed as possible.


Tibbetts, John C. *Schumann: A Chorus of Voices*. Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Amadeus Press, 2010. UMCP Performing Arts Library: ML410.S4 T43. Provides commentaries from notable contributors such as Marin Alsop and Nancy B. Reich. These commentaries provide significant insight on what was happening in Schumann’s life at any given point.

Dissertations:

*Originally accessed through WorldCat Database*. Discusses the importance of *Frauenliebe* as a means of finding equality in love. Examines various aspects of the song cycle, particularly artistic intent.


Grove Dictionary:


Musical Score:

Recordings:

Websites:


Iconography: