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A Study Of Robert Schumann's Liederkreis Op.39: Tracing Themes Of Nature From Poetry To Music

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**A Study Of Robert Schumann's Liederkreis Op.39:
Tracing Themes Of Nature From
Poetry To Music**

Mary Hannah F. Harkrader

April 13, 2007

**A research project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors
in Music, Lynchburg College 2007**

**A Study Of Robert Schumann's Liederkreis Op.39:
Tracing Themes Of Nature From Poetry To Music**

Honors Portfolio by Mary Hannah F. Harkrader

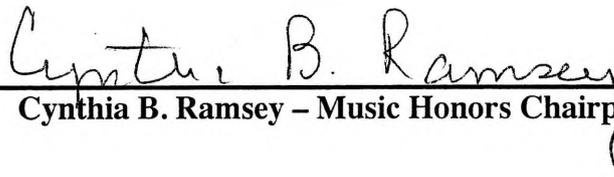
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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to gain information on Robert Schumann and trace themes of nature within his Liederkreis Op. 39. The specific problems of this study were as follows: 1.) to analyze the lieder of Schumann's Liederkreis Op. 39 in terms of form; 2.) to identify and trace the themes of nature in Liederkreis Op. 39; and 3.) to identify how these themes are found in both the music and poetry of Liederkreis Op. 39. A brief section of research places this specific song cycle in the context of time, place, and composer.

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Introduction

“Every composer is a poet, only at a higher level.” (Jensen, p.193). In his book, *Schumann*, Jensen states that Robert Schumann began “to fill a notebook with poetry suitable to set to music.” in 1839 (p.193). In 1840 Schumann composed approximately 140 Lieder and the year that music academics have coined ‘the year of song’.

Robert Schumann grew up reading and enjoying poetry, and for that reason Lieder might seem like a natural choice for the composer however; there were more practical reasons for composing these songs. The year 1840 was the time in which Robert Schumann would gain permission and marry the daughter of his former teacher, Clara Weick (1819-1896). Money was a necessity and Lieder could be printed and sold to middle class families who now were able to own their own pianos. The songs were meant to be sung in the intimate atmosphere of the home, and were not considered artistic enough to be performed in recitals. (Samson)

Schumann’s choice of poetry reflects the interests and nature of the composer. In order to achieve the connection necessary between music and text, the composer must understand the poetry he or she is setting to music, and interpret the emotions the poem conveys. Jensen, Wilhelm Von Wasielewski, and Walsh all note that nature is one of the major themes of Schumann’s Lieder, or conversely, that Schumann greatly enjoyed nature.

Studying law in Leipzig was arduous due to the fact that its bustling streets did not suit the romantic nature of Schumann. Biographers such as Jensen and Wilhelm Von Wasielewski state that from an early age Schumann enjoyed walks in the fields and

woods, and his letters home after moving from Leipzig to the University of Heidelberg show Schumann's dramatic change of mood. He greatly praised the scenic qualities of the town and the fresh air. His interest in nature can also be seen through his travels. He would make a trip out of going back to school with long stops along the way. These traits are found in the writings of biographer such as Walsh Jensen and Wilhelm Von Wasielewski.

Schumann's ability to blend poetry and music, voice, and piano, with adeptness is studied by researchers today, as evidence from the many written works on Schumann and his Lieder. These songs are interesting to academics because of their intimate connection with Robert Schumann in a year of great change in his personal and compositional life. Liederkreis Op. 39 was written in the earlier part of the year, before his marriage to Clara was assured. The cycle contains themes of nature throughout and serves as a representation of how Robert Schumann was able to take the text of the poems he chose and weave them into a song that would enhance the emotions of the poetry.

Purpose

With the intent of improving music pedagogy and performance, the purpose of this research is to gain information on Robert Schumann and trace themes of nature within his song cycle, Liederkreis Op. 39.

Problems

The specific problems of this study are as follows:

- 1.) Analyze the lieder of Schumann's Liederkreis Op. 39 in terms of form;
- 2.) Identify and trace the themes of nature in the Liederkreis Op. 39; and
- 3.) Identify how these themes are found in both the music and the poetry of Liederkreis Op.39

I. Biography

Although the Schumann family had roots in trade they also had strong musical interests and Robert was born into the family at a time of prosperity as well as the rise of the middle class. Friedrich August Schumann (1773-1826), Robert Schumann's father, had aspirations at a young age to become a writer. He was dissuaded from this dream by professionals who read his work and, instead of publishing his works, offered him a position in his bookstore. August was eventually further dissuaded from his dream of being a writer when he fell in love with the daughter of his host in Seitz and set up his own business. Through the years his business became very successful and he was able to set up a partnership with his brother. However, August's love of writing was never completely set aside. His bookstore gave him ample opportunity to enjoy literature and he wrote occasionally. (Jensen)

Robert shared his father's passion for literature and was musically inclined as well. As the youngest child Schumann received the full benefits of the family's newly earned money. He started piano lessons at the age of seven with Baccalaureus Kuntzsc (dates unknown), the best that Zwickau had to offer. Although Schumann had little patience for practice his improvisations showed an enthusiasm and natural talent from a young age. Wilhelm Von Wasielewski's (1975) biography contains a quote from a supplement to the *Universal Journal of Music*, "It has been related that Schumann, as a child, possessed rare taste and talent for portraying feelings and characteristic traits in melody, -ay, he could sketch the different dispositions of his intimate friends by certain figures and passages on the piano so exactly and comically that every one burst into loud

laughter at the similitude of the portrait.” (18). Much of Schumann’s practicing would consist of improvisations of this kind, and of a more serious nature, throughout his youth and manhood.

August died in 1826 and his death deeply affected Robert Schumann, as did any death in his family. He wrote in his personal journal entries on his grief at his father’s death. His longing for his father was probably heightened by his distaste for the rest of his family’s views on his future. Johanna Schumann (dates unknown) was fond of music, and sang herself; however, she and Schumann’s god-father had solid ideas about the vocation Schumann should pursue. The family sought to make use of the money August had earned in order to raise the family’s social standing beginning with Robert Schumann. The family decided that Schumann would attend the University in Leipzig with the intent to become a lawyer and Schumann complied. (Jensen, Wilhelm Von Wasielewski)

Schumann avoided both Leipzig and any schooling that had to do with law. He admits that his attempts at studying law consisted of walking to the doors of the lecture halls, pausing, and walking back to his apartments. Instead, he was devoted to spending time at the piano and his roommates would often find him there, with a cigar in his mouth, picking out melodies or studying the works of other composers. Despite his apathy for the study of law Schumann would delay making a decision, and informing his mother and guardian of his intent to pursue music until the summer of 1830. Wilhelm Von Wasielewski states that in Schumann’s letter to his mother he said “My whole life has been a twenty years’ war between poetry and prose, or, let us say, music and law.”(p.56) Although Schumann writes that his struggle was a choice between music and

law Jensen reminds his readers that “Schumann at age seventeen revealed greater attraction to literature than to music” (p.14).

The surrounding areas of the University in Leipzig did not appeal to Schumann. His deep love of nature was evident from an early age and affected his mood and work. His studies in Leipzig seemed more arduous as its bustling streets did not suit the Schumann’s romantic nature. As a boy and a man Schumann enjoyed walks in the fields and woods, and his letters home after moving from Leipzig to the University of Heidelberg show a dramatic change of mood. He praised the scenic qualities of the town and the fresh air. His interest in nature can also be seen through his travels. On several occasions Schumann made a trip out of going back to school with stops along the way.

Schumann’s formal training as a musician with the intent of being a performer. He wrote to his mother in 1830 and received permission to take lessons from Friedrich Wieck. Wieck was a well respected teacher whose daughter Clara was quickly becoming a virtuosic performer. This training was not to last very long. Wieck was concerned about Schumann’s practicing habits and set up a trial period of a year to see how he progressed. During that time Schumann’s admiration for Wieck slowly decreased. Wieck was intent on creating a performer out of his daughter and spent more time with Clara, than with Schumann. (Jensen)

Schumann also learning harmonization and began learning music theory with Heinrich Dorn (dates unknown), conductor of the orchestra at the royal theatre. His first completions were unorthodox in their methods. Jensen’s biography contains this quote from the Dorn, “The first four-part chorale---which he had to do for me as an indication of his knowledge of harmony—broke all the rules of part-writing.” (p.64) As with piano

playing, Schumann was more interested in teaching himself. Schumann poured over scores composed by his favorites like J.S. Bach, and Schubert. (Wilhelm Von Wasielewski) Schumann's year of training with Wieck was cut short by an injury to his hand made any idea of a career as a performer obsolete. He returned to his own studies of scores and to his composing. Despite ending his training as a performer, Robert Schumann's connection to the Wieck household was not complete. Clara Wieck (1819-1896), Wieck's daughter and protégé held an enormous influence over Schumann's year of song. Their courtship gave him inspiration to write both beautiful love letters and songs.

The relationship began through Robert's admiration of Clara as a performer and her nature and deepened into a romantic relationship. When Clara was not quite fourteen, and Schumann twenty-three in August of 1833 Clara sent Schumann her own composition, dedicated to him. He wrote back and sent her variations on the theme she had composed, dedicated to her father. The letter contains some of the initial signs of Schumann's romantic desires for Clara. From a letter to Clara in Jensen's biography: "Tomorrow precisely at eleven o'clock I will play the adagio from Chopin's Variations and at the same time I shall think of you very intently, exclusively of you. Now my request is that you should do the same, so that we may see and meet each other in spirit." (pp.77-78)

Both Clara and Robert shared an interest in music and in the composer Frederic Chopin (1810-1849) specifically. After Clara's returned love for Schumann was acknowledged, Schumann tried to attain the blessing of Friedrich Wieck, but Wieck was obstinate. Wieck voiced concerns over Schumann's financial status and claimed that his

daughter was too young for marriage. This appeased Schumann for a short while, but the drastic measures Wieck went to in order to keep the lovers apart soon aroused his anger. In order to ensure that the two would not see each other Wieck took his daughter to Dresden in January of 1836. It was Clara that would reinitiate correspondence with Schumann. She wrote and asked for the letters her father had forced her to return. Schumann refused to send back the old letters but wrote new letters, and a mutual friend passed the letters between the lovers. On August fourteenth of the same year the young couple became engaged without her father's permission. The next month Schumann wrote for permission to marry Clara, but Wieck again refused. He demanded that the relationship be put on halt for two years, and that until that time the couple were not to be left alone together nor correspond through letters.

Although this long courtship was not ideal, Schumann was caught up in the romance of their situation. The obstinate father, the distant yearning, and the years spent secretly meeting and writing were inspiring. Eric Jensen writes,

"Some of the letters they [Clara and Robert] sent to one another during the next two years are among the most beautiful ever written. Schumann was eloquent and eager to display his love. Clara was inspired by his passion....For Schumann in particular it was if he were once again living in a novel: two lovers destined for one another but thwarted by a reprehensible father." (p.126)

Wieck vehemently opposed the marriage and used all means possible to keep the lovers apart. Throughout these trials Clara remained devoted to her relationship with Schumann even when faced with other suitors, distance, and success. The long struggle was not all romance however, and it took its toll on both the lovers. Schumann had another emotional attack similar to the one he had years ago upon the death of his sister-in-law, and Clara struggled to maintain herself under the opposing pulls of her father and

her lover. From a letter quoted in the biography by Jensen, "My spirit is strong, my heart constant and unchanged." Clara wrote, and she remained faithful throughout the years of struggling; only doubting when it seemed her career as a performer could not continue after marriage. (p.126)

It was not until September of 1840 that Schumann and Clara were finally married. Schumann and Clara both had written law officials to receive permission for their marriage. They had desperate hopes that they would be able to override Friedrich Wieck's refusal and be allowed to marry. They finally received permission from Friedrich only after the court ordered he give his permission to their union.

The year of 1840 is known as the year of song. During this year Schumann composed about 140 *Lieder*, for the most part collected in song cycles. The effects of Clara Wieck and Robert Schumann's courtship on the output cannot be denied. Their situation was certainly a stimulus to this outflow of song. (Jensen, Wilhelm Von Wasielewski) Although the separation before their marriage was painful, it served as a stimulus to Schumann's creativity. Stephen Walsh's book *The Lieder of Schumann* contains this quote from a letter from Schumann to Clara; "It is very strange...but if I write much to you, as I am doing now, I cannot compose. The music all goes to you." (p.7).

The *Lieder* were also highly influenced by Schumann's personal study of Schubert; however Schumann had his own unique style which was developed in one year, while Schubert composed *Lieder* for years. For this reason Schumann's *Lieder* output are concentrated and can be seen as directly influenced by what was going on around him at the time.

The *Liederkreis* was composed in 1840 along with many lieder written by Schumann at the time. The words are from a collection of poems written by Joseph Freiherr von Eichendorff (1788–1857), a famous German poet of the time, and one of whom Clara Schumann was particularly fond. This collection of poems is not based on the usual topic of love, but on solitude. Songs in a cycle were typically connected together in order to tell a story however, Schumann's *Liederkreis* is more loosely based on themes and connections within the twelve poems than a storyline.

II. Themes of Nature in Liederkreis Op. 39

Nature is a reoccurring theme in Robert Schumann's *Lieder*. Elements of nature are used to convey sentiment in Robert Schumann's *Lieder* and are seen not only in the poetry, but in the music itself. The piano is often used as a second voice that aids the voice in conveying the themes and emotions of the text. Liederkreis Op. 39 contains themes of nature in all twelve of the *Lieder* in this cycle. By organizing these songs in groups according to how they use nature as a theme an understanding of Schumann's general use of nature will be gained.

In *Mondnacht*, Moonlight Night, patterns on the piano work with the voice to create a sense of romantic setting. The voice ascends the scale as if to imitate the soft breeze of the night. This melody begins each couplet of the poetry. The pattern of its use changes only when the narrative shifts from a description of the setting, to the related feelings of the poet. The line "*Und meine Seele spannte*", and my soul unfolded, marks the shift in topic with a change in the music. The low note contrasts the rising phrases of the beginning.

The eighth song, entitled *In der Fremde*, also uses a pattern in the piano to emphasize both setting and mood. In this song the sound also creates a sense of irony. It begins with trills on the piano emphasizing the rushing brooklets and the beautiful scenery of the text. Between each phrase of description the trill of the piano is heard again. These light trills take on a solemn tone as the lover speaks of his beloved. It is only the final line of the poem that brings sadness to this *Lied*. The rest of the song is all a

description of the beautiful landscape, until the singer repeats the final phrase “*Und is doch so lange tot...*”, *Yet she* [the beloved] *has been so long dead*. The happy trills of the brooks slow slightly in the third repetition of this line. The cruel irony is created after the third repetition is complete and the piano takes over and ends the merry song with a solemn final chord.

References to birds are common in these *lieder* as eight of the songs contain this analogy to birds. The first three references are found in the songs *Intermezzo*, *Die Stille*, and *Mondnacht*. These three *lieder* compare either the song or soul of the poet to a bird with the ability to fly to the beloved. In *Die Stille* the beginning of the song remains contained at an average meter. The directions are *nicht schnell, immer sehr leise*, not fast, always very soft; and this is maintained until measure 17. Here the meter moves just slightly faster to correspond with the line: *Ich wunscht, Ich warein Voglein und soge uber das Meer*, I wish I were a little bird flying over the sea.

The remaining references, in *Auf einer Burg*, *In der Fremde* (VIII), *Wehmut*, *Im Walde*, and *Fruhlingsnacht*, refer to birds singing and are used to highlight the solitary nature of the poet. The birds seem to represent a togetherness that the poet does not have with their joyful songs to one another. In many cases they also represent happiness the poet does not have, as the poet is often separated from the beloved. However, there are times when the birds' songs echo the sadness of the poet as in *Wehmut*, where the nightingales sing a song of yearning.

The Liederkreis Op. 39 song cycle has no overarching narrative however; themes like nature hold the cycle together. Water and moonlight are two themes of Liederkreis Op. 39. They give the cycle a slightly mystical feeling which is echoed in the music.

Schumann makes use of arpeggios, dance like rhythms, and the text of the poetry he chooses to create mood, and to aid in conveyance of the emotional themes.

III. Analysis of Liederkreis Op. 39

I. In Der Fremde (In Foreign Land)

In Der Fremde is composed in a ternary form. It makes use of Neopaltan chords in measures 22 and 24, both leading to vii. Schumann uses e as a pedal tone through measures 21-28.

A	B	A
(1-9)	(9-19)	(19-28)
em -----	AM----- a-----	em-----EM ----

II. Intermezzo (Intermezzo)

Intermezzo is also written in ternary form however it uses a V/V. Examples of this can be found in measures 3 and 15.

A	B	A
(1-9)	(9-17)	(17-30)
FM-----	gm-----	FM-----

III. Waldesgesprach (Dialogue in the Woods)

Waldesgesprach is in expanded two part form. Schumann uses the introduction and codetta as the accompaniment to the A sections. In measures 25-29 and 55-59 Schumann used a descending chromatic scale from a d to an c.

Intro	A	B	A ¹	B	Codetta
(1-4)	(5-15)	(15-32)	(33-44)	(44-64)	(64-72)
DM -----	BbM-----	DM -----	dm—	DM -----	

IV. Die Stille (The Silence)

Die Stille is in ternary form. Unlike all the other songs *Die Stille* remains in one key throughout.

A	B	A ¹
(1-16)	(17-24)	(25-39)
FM -----		

V. *Mondnacht* (Moonlight Night)

Mondnacht is in incipient three-part form. The repeated chords in the piano remain on dominant repeatedly (F# in m5 ect.) extending resolution. The first phrase of each period (a) is in dominant key, then the second phrase transitions to tonic.

	A			A		B		A	
Intro	a	a	Interlude	a	a	b	a	Coda	
(1-6)	(6-14)	(15-22)	(23-28)	(28-36)	(36-44)	(44-52)	(53-60)	(61-68)	
BM	-----								

VI. *Schone Fremde* (Beautiful Stranger)

Schone Fremde is through composed and exhibits many borrowed chords. The lied begins with bm (m.1), leading to EM (m.2), which eventually leads to G (m.4).

A	B	C	Coda
(m#1-7)	(7-16)	(16-24)	(24-30)
GM	-----		

VII. Auf Einer Burg (In A Stronghold)

Auf Einer Burg is in a binary form. The B section is a two measure idea in sequence several times. The E Major chord serves as Dominant of the minor interlude. Schumann uses the same chord to end the key in E Major in measure 38-39. (Picardy).

A	B	Interlude	A	B
(1-8)	(9-18)	(18-21)	(22-29)	(30-39)
em	-----	am-----	em	----- EM

VIII. In Der Fremde (In Foreign Land)

In Der Fremde is in binary form. Schumann experiments with switching between the minor tonic and the major tonic, F# Minor and F# Major.

A	B	A	B	Coda
(1-9)	(10-17)	(18-25)	(26-33)	(34-39)
f#m-----	F#M-----	f#m-----	F#M-----	f#m—F#M

IX. Wehmut (Melancholy)

Wehmut is in ternary form.

A	B	A	Coda
(1-9)	(10-17)	(17-25)	(25-28)
DM-----			

X. Zwielight (Twilight)

Zwielight is a series of variations in which the voice and the piano part become increasingly embellished.

Intro	A	A'	A''	A'''
(1-7)	(8-15)	(16-23)	(24-32)	(33-41)
dm -----				

XI. In Walde (In The Forest)

In Walde is written in binary form, with a clear difference in style between the A and B sections. The A section is very lively and bouncy while the B section is quite legato with the piano part sustaining a D for twelve measures.

A			B
a	b	a'	c
(1-12)	(12-22)	(22-32)	(32-50)
GM-----	FM-----	EM-----	GM-----

XII. Frühlingsnacht (Spring Night)

Frühlingsnacht is in ternary form; in which Schumann experiments with interplay between E Major and C# Major, the parallel major of its relative minor, C# Minor.

A	B	A	Codetta
(1-9)	(10-17)	(18-26)	(26-31)
C#M-----	EM-----	C#M-----	EM-----

IV. Conclusion

Robert Schumann's *Liederkreis* Op. 39 is just one example of the interwoven nature of his lieder. Not only are themes within the poetry woven into the music but multiple themes are woven within each other to create a blend of expressions and musical techniques designed to move its audience. The *Liederkreis* cycle is created with nature used throughout to support other themes of love and solitude. This research shows Schumann's ability to translate the sounds of nature into music.

Schumann wrote, "Every composer is a poet, only at a higher level." (Jensen, p.193). Despite arguments by some critics that Schumann's Lieder show disrespect to the poems used as text, the attention to emotional detail within the works is undeniable. In this way Schumann was a poet of music and created his lieder with an emphasis on emotional expression. Nature was merely one element that Schumann was able to weave together in order to create his *Lieder*.

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