

From *Stabat mater* to *Totengräbers Heimweh*: Schubert's Propinquity to Pergolesi

Justin Rubin, DMA
 Professor of Music
 University of Minnesota Duluth

The opening motif of one of Schubert's particularly extraordinary lieder from 1825, *Totengräbers Heimweh* [D.842], is a fierce declamation in f minor that dominates the main musical material of the first half of the piece. When one compares an inner portion of this passage with the opening statement of Giovanni Battista Pergolesi's famous *Stabat mater* from 1736 the striking similarity is undeniable.

Ex. 1. Schubert, *Totengräbers Heimweh* [D. 842].

Bars 3-6

O Mensch-heit, o Le-ben, was soll's? o was soll's? Gra-be aus,

Appoggiature

f minor: i ii^{o7} V⁴⁻³ i V⁴⁻³ i⁹⁻⁸ V⁴⁻³/III III V

Ex. 2. Pergolesi, *Stabat mater*, No. 1.

Bars 12-14

Sta - - - - bat ma - - - - ter do - - -

Suspensions

f minor: i V⁴⁻³ i⁹⁻⁸ V⁴⁻³/III III iv⁹⁻⁸

Had this similarity been only the same tonality and progression (which is not exceptionally unusual) I would have thought it a coincidence. However, when one takes into account the bass figuration in combination with the stepwise rising melodic line it becomes less plausible as being merely a fluke. Compound this with fact that even the use of dissonance is the same (although in the Pergolesi they are articulated as suspensions through dovetailing melodic lines and in the Schubert they are expressed as a series of appoggiature within the pulsating accompaniment) makes this correlation difficult to ignore; there must be more to this matter from Schubert's perspective.

I began my investigation of this parallelism with the thought that Schubert might have felt an affinity with this other prolific young composer who was struck down in the prime of life at only 26. There is no doubt that he was familiar with Pergolesi's very famous late masterwork. To say that his compositions were well known throughout Europe is an understatement; even before the publication of the *Stabat mater* in 1749 in London¹ it had already become an enormously fashionable piece and was adapted by numerous composers for other ensembles, including one such arrangement by J. S. Bach in 1740 for a setting of Psalm 51 (BWV 1083). As the most frequently printed work of music throughout the 18th century, and the fact that the young Schubert's formal education occurred within the Catholic confines of the Kaiserlich-königliches Stadtkonvikt, it is certain that he studied the work, if not indeed performed in it during his tenure as a member of the choir at the institution. Whether it be through the varied musical experiences there as a violinist under Dr. Innocenz Lang, the guidance of Josef von Spaun, or the instruction of Pergolesi's countryman Antonio Salieri, Schubert's exposure to this staple of the literature must almost be taken for granted.² He himself composed two versions of the *Stabat mater*, a foreshortened one from 1815 in g minor [D.175], and, more relevantly here, a much vaster, multi-movement setting of the twelve-stanza structure from February 1816 [D. 383] in the same key as Pergolesi's setting and his own later *Totengräbers* (f minor). Although this more expansive piece is a much-

¹ Helmut Huckle and Dale E. Monson. "Pergolesi, Giovanni Battista." In *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/21325> (accessed May 23, 2008) at 2: "Posthumous fame".

² Robert Winter, et al. "Schubert, Franz." In *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/25109pg1> (accessed May 26, 2008) at 1, 1 "Background and childhood".

altered German paraphrase of the original Latin and shows no musical material similarities as the Pergolesi, the key parallel can be regarded as strong evidence in and of itself. Schubert's large-scale settings of religious texts at this period may be only due primarily for his want to impress for a possible position as music master at a training college in Laibach³ (or Ljubljana in modern-day Slovenia) and thus modeling after such a well known masterwork would not seem an inappropriate route.

In 1820, only a few years after leaving the Stadtkonvikt, Schubert attended some of the so-called 'historical concerts' organized by, and performed at the Viennese residence of the Czech-born musical historiographer Raphael Georg Kiesewetter (1773-1850).⁴ Kiesewetter was primarily in government service, but his devotion to early music led to some serious scholarly work in the field of musicology culminating in the 1834 publication of his *Geschichte der europäisch-abendländischen oder unsrer heutigen Musik*. Although Pergolesi's *Stabat mater* in particular was not featured on any of the programs, a number of his other works were, including a *Salve regina*, *Laudate pueri*, and a *Miserere* (Antonio Caldara's *Stabat mater* was however performed, though it does not seem to have exhibited any musical influence on Schubert). Kiesewetter's library of musical scores was exhaustive and it would also appear that Schubert may have had some perusal access to its contents as well. What is equally important is that Schubert's interest and connection to music of an earlier period persisted beyond his teenage years and may still have had direct influence on his mature thinking, even in his modernist aesthetic dominated by Beethovenian thought. The quote from the *Stabat mater* can be explored as a Beethovenian arrangement of Pergolesi: Baroque pastels struck with hammers and hard reality.

The text of *Totengräbers Heimweh* (Gravedigger's homesickness) and the first section of the *Stabat mater* (Sorrowful mother) deal with mortality, albeit with significantly different characters. In the former there is an abject feeling of isolation and dejection, while the later is reassuring in the sharing of pain in life. Both however

³ Maurice J. E. Brown. "Schubert's Settings of the 'Salve Regina'." *Music and Letters*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (July, 1956): 242.

⁴ Werner Bodendorff. "Musik alter Meister-Schubert und Kiesewetter." *Schubert durch die Brille; Mitteilungen*, Vol. 19 (June, 1997): 9-12.

conclude with the ideal of reuniting after death as an ultimate reward for the strife and suffering that life has posed.

Translation of select portions from *Totengräbers Heimweh* (text by Craigher de Jachelutta [1797-1855]):

O mankind, O life! For what, oh for what?
Dig out, fill in! Day and night no rest!
This hustle, this bustle, leads where? Where?...
“The grave, the grave, deep down!”
... When, O hour of peace, will you toll for me?...
... To be alive is so oppressive!...
... Alone I stand,
by all forsaken, death my sole kin...
... I'm sinking, sinking! My loved ones, I'm coming!

Translation selections from the *Stabat mater* (text attributed to Jacopone da Todi [1228-1306]):

At the Cross her station keeping,
stood the mournful Mother weeping,
close to Jesus to the last.

... Is there one who would not weep,
whelmed in miseries so deep...
... Let me share with thee His pain...
... Let me mingle tears with thee...

When my body dies,
let my soul be granted
the glory of Paradise.

Schubert was all too aware of his syphilitic condition at this point as he had contracted the disease a few years before at the age of twenty-five (how close to Pergolesi he may have thought!). However 1825 was a ‘reprieve’ in the progression of his illness⁵ and one of the few happy periods towards the end of his life. So why choose at that point to set one of the dourest of poems and draw on a self-conscious connection with the possible shared fate of Pergolesi? However we must remember that even in the most positive of times during his brief life the specter of death seems to have always haunted Schubert. This can be documented as early as his *Nonett in e-flat minor* for winds [D.79] from 1813 when he was at the outset of his artistic life. This short, but

brilliantly simple work was titled (quite unusually for a sixteen year old) “Franz Schuberts Begräbnis-Feyer”- quite literally “My Funeral Celebration (Rite)”. It is a sad fact that, not unlike most families of the time, the majority of his older siblings died in infancy or early childhood. Is it a possibility that this hard reality of life was made known to him by his parents or brothers at an early age (as he was younger than all but one), and this subsequently made this sensitive child inordinately aware of his strong lineage of youthful mortality? In this case his setting of *Totengräbers* is more easily explained; death was always at hand and could be lurking when least expected, even during the mitigation of symptoms he was experiencing. The invariably aggressive tone of the first half of the work can be interpreted as Schubert’s rage against fate, the second his acceptance of it.

It is again, and perhaps more simply, a possibility that Schubert never really experienced a long enough period of good health without the reminder of illness to mentally separate himself from it. In a letter dated the 14th of February, 1825, Schubert’s close friend, the artist Mortiz von Schwind, remarks that the composer had to return briefly to hospital for a ‘treatment’⁶. Even in a time when recuperative powers were taking somewhat of a foothold, his outlook remained clouded.

As to the religious connection, inasmuch as Pergolesi’s composition is indelibly connected with the traditional practice of Catholicism coupled with fact that Schubert struggled with the dogma of this same faith from adolescence onwards⁷ makes the quote that much more meaningful in its transcription into *Totengräbers*. The tone of sorrowful acceptance with which Pergolesi professes his beliefs is transfigured over three-quarters of a century later into a fiery tirade questioning the capricious reasoning of the universe. Autobiographically one must also sympathize with Schubert reading into this poem and choosing it as a reflection of his apparent despondency and as an expression of the frustrating dead-ends and disappointments of his professional as well as personal life.

⁵ Robert Winter, et al. "Schubert, Franz." In *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/25109pg1> (accessed May 26, 2008) at 1, 10 “Respite: the summer of 1825”.

⁶ John Reed. *The Schubert Song Companion*. (Universe Books, New York: 1985): 406.

⁷ Christopher H. Gibbs. *The Life of Schubert* (Cambridge, The United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press: 2000): 54-55.