

In Search of the Center: An Attempted Analysis of the Melody Line of Schubert's "Heidenröslein"

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Abstract: *The paper comes from my exciting experience studying music theory at St. John's College, Annapolis, and was written for Ms. Patricia Locke's class there. It analyses the melody line of a Schubert's tune, whose key changes in the middle, trying to see how the center is established. I have had a continuous interest in melody lines and the way they are organized around a center since then, guessing that it may prove important for a philosophical phenomenon I have come to call "absolutization."*

Key words: *melody line, center, Schubert, "Heidenröslein".*

INTRODUCTION

Schubert's "Heidenröslein", as the key signature tells us immediately, is written in G major; the tone G therefore is its center, the point of stability and satisfaction. When I listened to the piece first, however, the two appearances of G, at the end of measures 4 and 12 respectively, struck me, before I even knew they were Gs, as highly dramatic, not unbalanced musically, but almost poignantly unsettling, disturbing emotionally. On subsequent hearings, I failed to convince myself that I was wrong: knowing that these two places were points of "perfect balance" did not change the feeling I got from them. So I set out to explore if and how this was possible, and also to try and explain to myself the fact, far more disturbing to my timidly groping musical educatedness, of $\wedge 8$ not sounding exactly like $\wedge 1$.

PRESENTATION

The melody line of Schubert's "Heidenröslein" divides into three large parts: measures 1-4, 5-10, and 11-16. The central, "inner" part stands out as different, in the overall character of the melodic motion, but also, and much more importantly, in terms of the dynamic qualities of the tones. The key changes here to D major, with the respective change of the center. This change, however, even though it is effected for so large a portion of the whole melody, is clearly perceivable in its structure as secondary: thus, even here the "main" key is in a way felt, subtly interacting with the new one. The change of key in the second part, therefore, introduces ambiguity in the melody line, and might be connected with, or indeed help create, bring out, the problematic character of the center as it appears in measures 4 and 12 of the first and third part. (With the second part standing out as different, the other two parts are connected, belong together: after 'doing something' in measures 5-10, the melody comes back to the same musical space it was originally in.)

The first two measures, and especially the second, are of crucial importance. With a flat even, and more or less comfortable start at B, having the "in-between" (from center to counterpole) dynamic quality $\wedge 3$, the melody rises through a minor third to reach the counterpole easily and immediately (D, the first tone in the second measure), and then descends slowly, slightly emphasizing $\wedge 4$, C, to a highly unstable A ($\wedge 2$), sharply pointing further down to $\wedge 1$, to G, which is *not* reached, however. Instead, the melody goes up to the counterpole in the next phrase, to jump from it a perfect fourth up and briefly touch the center, G, $\wedge 8$. That does not feel comfortable and resolving though, as I already pointed out. So the confused melody makes a brief rest (I almost picture it looking around at that point), and decides to make a fresh start. Again, it takes its time preparing to set out on the journey (measure 5 exactly repeats measure 1; although both feel relatively comfortable, they are clearly starting places, not intended for rest), and again it easily reaches the counterpole, D, through the same interval between measures 5 and 6 as between 1 and 2.

But now the change occurs: the next step is a half one, down to a sharpened C, which changes the key and establishes for the entire second part D as a center. It appears as though the melody falls out of its center down to the tone from which it is trying to reach it in measure 4, D, the “proper” counterpole, which has at least some stability, and now, in its new start, tries to explore *it* as a center.

By the end of measure 6, A is visited, which now does not at all sound as unstable as it did in measures 2 and 3. It has lost the dynamic quality ^{^2} and acquired a new one, ^{^5}; thus the new musical space is entirely defined, the new key established. Measure 6 also contains the points which determine the motion of the melody in the second part: it spends most time flirting around the new center, D, but also some, in measure 9, around B, which has appeared in measure 6 right after the sharpened, key-changing C. The two Bs in measure 9 are emphasized by the chromatic A # between them, and that directs our attention to them and to an examination of their dynamic quality. In the key of D major, it is B, rather strange for such an emphasis. In the main key, the key of G, however, B is the third, a much more important tone, in fact the tone that begins the piece. This is how, to my mind, the key of G shines through the effort to leave it in the second part, where the motion revolves, ultimately, around *its* fifth and third. Moreover, G in the tenth measure, the strongest, most desperate point in the melody, owes its character not only to the ambiguous dynamic quality, ^{^4}, it has in the key of D, the key of the second part, but also, and more importantly, to the fact that it is the abandoned, but not forgotten ^{^8} in the key of G. After this sharp remainder, the ostensibly triumphant reaching of D, the “foster” center, at the end of measure 10 has lost the comfort it possesses at the end of measure 8: the melody is forced to return to its failed attempt to get “home” from the phrase in measures 3-4, to face it, leaving any hope for an easy way out behind. Measure 11 exactly repeats measure 3, measure 12 supplies the missing E and F between ^{^5} and ^{^8} – a climb instead of a jump, a higher degree of seriousness. The new, and longer, encounter of G as ^{^8}, as a center, because of that very seriousness, is even more uncomfortable, however, than the one in measure 4. Not until it returns to its motion from measure 2, before the failed attempt to find the center an octave above from 3-4, and completes *that*, does the melody achieve resolution, serenity, and “perfect balance”. This downward motion is elaborately unfolded in measures 13 and 14, with a play around C, ^{^4} (simply repeated in measure 2), in the first one, and a now complete ^{^3-^2-^1} in the second. The ^{^1}, the unmistakable center, even appears before this motion, as the first tone of measure 14: the goal of the movement is defined with utmost clarity, and reaching that goal is highly pronounced. (The same movement, ^{^1-^3-^2-^1}, has occurred already, constituted of course of different tones, passingly and ephemerally, in measure 9 of the second part. What works so effectively here, in its proper place, is hardly noticed where it does not belong.)

DEDUKTION

The search has been completed. Not a search of a, of any center, but exactly a search of **the** center, the center implicitly pointed at in measure 2; the same one that feels uncomfortable in measures 4 and 12. As if the correct **way** of reaching it has now been found, and we are able to reclaim what is our own already, able to feel at home at our home. Only rest can follow that.

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