The Connection Between Music And Words In The Songs Of Robert Schumann

This essay will demonstrate the connection between music and words in the songs of Robert Schumann. I will be referring to two of his songs; ‘Widmung’ and ‘Ich grolle nicht’ and will discuss whether a relationship exists between the lyrics and the music.

Schumann (1810-1856) had been regarded as a brilliant pianist who was predicted by his teacher to become one of the finest in Europe (Haother, 2015). However as suffering from a hand injury, his dreams of pursuing a virtuoso career were cut short. Instead, he decided to concentrate on composing and has written many successful songs and musical works in his lifetime.

It is clear from Schumann’s early works that there is no display of connection between words and music as up until the year of 1840, Schumann's works were all dedicated for piano solo. Due to their poetic nature and song- like character, this could perhaps suggest that the outburst of song which followed is a logical development (Obenshain, K). After discovering his love for song writing, in 1840, Schumann wrote Clara Wieck: 'Oh, what bliss to be writing songs! And I have neglected it all these years!' Later: 'I compose so fast, it is almost unnatural; but I could sing myself to death, like the nightingale,'(Bedford, 1925, P.141). Every emotion that Schumann associated with love, marriage and companionship is represented through his music. Each lyric captures exactly how Clara made him feel. Therefore, it is evident that there is a connection between the words and music of Schumann’s works.

Schumann’s keen interest in literature led him to choose poems with great care and in setting them, to strike a fine balance between poetry and music (Harkrader, 2007). His treatment of the voice is extremely varied, yet his accompaniments are rich and inventive. A characteristic feature of several of Schumann’s songs is the postlude- for piano alone; and these closing bars often carry considerable emotional significance in his works.

‘Widmung’ and ‘Ich grolle nicht’ are song examples of a specific genre, the Lied. Schumann made many important contributions to this form largely inspired by his love for Clara Wieck who despite her father’s objections, was eventually to become his wife (Libbey, 2010).

The first piece I will discuss is ‘Widmung’ which is written for voice and piano and is in ternary form. This piece was written during Schumann’s “year of song” along with the rest of Op. 25, as a wedding gift for Clara. The lyrics are taken from a poem by Friedrich Ruckert, but the title is Schumann’s own which translates to ‘Devotion’ or ‘Dedication’ (Gindap, 2008). It forms part of the Myrthen song cycle, and is a typical lied as it compresses the maximum amount of emotion into a short time span, inspired by his muse Clara. This is achieved in no small measure through the pianos consistent use of a distinctive rhythmic or melodic motif. In this case the accompaniment is unified by rising and falling arpeggios, dotted rhythm and the tonic/dominant/tonic chords at the end of each bar. Above this, the voice launches a joyous, elated melody, doubled at times by the piano part. Schumann manages to embody the excitement of being in love through the shape of the melody, as it is so full of energy.

The work starts with a flowing sense of pulse, with the opening two bars of the vocal melody being constructed around the notes of the tonic triad. The first phrase “Du meine Seele, du mein Herz” (you my soul, you my heart) already captures Schumann’s love for Clara and devotion to their relationship. Here, Schumann sincerely confesses to Clara, declaring how important she is to him. For him, Clara is his angel, his spiritual support, and his entire world. The rising major sixth from bar 3 into bar 4 in the vocal line emphasises the key word ‘Wonn’ (bliss). The use of a subdominant minor chord (Db minor) on the word Schmerz (pain) at the beginning of bar 5 shows the connection between the words and the music as this is an example of word painting. The melody and harmony of bars 5-7 is immediately transposed up a perfect fourth in bars 7-9. There is also a feminine cadence in bar 7 as it falls on the weak beat of the bar.

The falling scale in bar 9 is a melodic link back to bar 4 and the seriousness of the word Grab (grave) on the first beat of bar 10 is accentuated by the use of a diminished seventh chord. This unity of the first section, which finishes with a perfect cadence in Ab major, is ensured by the presence of the dotted quaver/ semiquaver motif in all but two of its thirteen bars.

In the second section there is a change of mood which fits appropriately with the words “Du Bist die Ruh” (You are repose) as there is a change of music such as; the use of longer note values in the vocal melody (semibreves), the use of a lower tessitura of the melody and the change of key to E major with Ab/G# acting as an enharmonic pivot note and the introduction of repeated chords in triplet crotchets in the accompaniment. This sudden change in the music provokes a sense of fear and insecurity, due to separation and uncertainty about the future. There is a modulation to F# minor at bar 19, and the expressiveness of the music is heightened by the 9/8 suspension at the start of this bar, the inner countermelody featuring chromatic movement in the piano’s left hand and the use of the turn to decorate the vocal melody in bar 20. Although the text “Dass du mich liebst” (That you love me) is different, the music of bar 21-25 is an exact transposition of the melodic and harmonic material heard earlier at bar 5-9.Another enharmonic pivot note- in this case C#/Db- initiates the transition to the ‘A’ material in which the dotted quaver/ semiquaver motif is reintroduced in bars 26-29 over a dominant pedal point.

The repeated chords convey warmth, tenderness and peace, especially when the text here is associated with death and heaven. Here, the love has changed into everlasting, eternal one – love that transcends space and time. After the brief hand-crossing passage, the music reaches its most technically brilliant and rousing part with arpeggios on right hand and chords highlighting the melodic line on left hand, revealing Schumann’s most intimate feelings. It is the moment when Schumann’s love for Clara becomes so dramatic and uncontrollable, and eventually erupts, portraying a perfect combination of passion, commitment and sense of elevation. The rich orchestral colours in the music further heighten the emotional intensity.

Bars 30-35 are musically and textually the same as bars 2-7 until there is a change in the harmony (F7) on the third beat of bar 35 leading towards Bb minor. The phrase which comprises bars 33-35 is treated as an ascending sequence in bars 35-37 before a diminished seventh chord on the last crotchet of bar 37 returns the music to Ab major at bar 39 via a 4/3 suspension and perfect cadence. The change in harmony here responds to the change in mood. The pianos coda in bars 40-41 combines a phrase derived from bars 14-16 with a bass line which descends mainly in semitones. A slightly rewritten version of this in bar 42 leads to the final Ab major chord. In the extended coda, the passion in the music remains, but this time presenting different moods. With ecstatic joy, the music transforms into a declaration, as if

Schumann is announcing that he is determined to spend the rest of his lifetime with Clara and willing to make sacrifices in the face of adversity, for Clara is an indescribable miracle of his life. This complex mixture of feelings throughout ‘Widmung’ certainly strengthens the emotional power of the music, showing there is a strong connection between the lyrics and the music.

Another one of Schumann’s pieces is ‘Ich grolle nicht’ which is also written for voice and piano. It is the seventh song in the Dichterliebe cycle dating from 1840 in which Schumann sets words by the poet Heine. The unifying factor in this lied is the repeated quaver chords in the pianos right hand whose minims delineate the steady harmonic rhythm. The vocal melody meanwhile is characterised by a three-quaver anacrusis, dotted rhythms and the interval of a rising perfect fifth.

From the opening, it is not obvious to distinguish the underlying tragedy of the situation. In fact, the entire piece is in the familiar key of C major where the two major chords(C major and F major) convey a rather peaceful, positive mood. There is an interesting tension, however, since the text seems to suggest otherwise. These features create a dignified and restrained response to the text “Ich grolle nicht” (I bear no grudge) with the Ab in the melody coinciding with a diminished triad on Herz (heart) to highlight the significant word. This prominently hints at a shift in emotion.

Throughout this passage the feeling of loss and pain is intensified by Schumann’s use of frequent modulations, unresolved dissonances and the effective use of harmony: for example; the coldness of the woman’s heart is effected by a strikingly modulation from a modally inflected A minor in bars 4-5 into the remote key of B minor in bars 14-16. In bar 5 beat 3 he uses C+7, bar 6 beat 1 F+7 and bar 6 beat 3 C+6. In bar 11 he also uses a diminished 7th in the harmony. In “Es fällt kein Strahl in deines Herzens Nacht”, he accepts the coldness of his beloved’s heart and contrasts it with the outward radiance of her beauty in “Wie du auch strahlstin Diamantenpracht”. The resolution of the dominant seventh chord at the end of bar 16 is delayed until after the words “das weiss ich langst” (i’ve known it long) representing an example of word painting due to the length of the note ‘langst’ (6 beats).

Most of the second verse is set to the same music as the first. The sudden change of dynamic to piano at bar 23 draws attention to the text “Ich sah dich ja im Traume” (I have seen you in my dreams) before the climax of the song in bars 27-28. Here the baritone soars to a high A on “Herzen frisst” (eats into the heart) before descending towards the cadence in at bar 30. The poignancy of the text is reflected in the harmonic tension created by diminished triads and the augmented triad which occurs half way through bar 28. The uncertainty created by the interrupted cadence in A minor in bars 30-31 is dispelled by the perfect cadence in the tonic into bar 32. By the end of the poem, he even pities her “Ich sah, mein Lieb, wie sehr du elend bist”. Yet, as the cycle progresses, this turns out to be only a manifestation of his fleeting resolution.

Against the descending harmonies of this passage, Schumann brings the vocal melody to its conclusion, terminating it with two repetitions of the opening phrase (“Ich grolle nicht”). The ending defiantly descends from the dominant to the tonic, as the piano takes off with a short codetta of reiterated chords. The short coda consists of three plagal cadences in the tonic key followed by one last perfect cadence.

Like Widmung, Ich grolle nicht compresses the maximum amount of emotion into a short time span in much the same way that Schumann’s character pieces for piano are a concentration of

his musical thought. Overall, it is evident that there is a strong connection between words and music in Schumann’s work.