The Poems of Schubert’s Die Winterreise

English Translation

Barry Mitchell

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Preface

About the Author

Barry Mitchell was born in Belfast in 1958. He studied music at Queen’s University Belfast where after completing a first degree he studied for an MA in composition. He is also a graduate of The Open University. He has taught music for several colleges and universities in the UK including The Open University and Rose Bruford College of Theatre & Performance. He has worked as a music examiner for Edexcel Foundation and International Baccalaureate Organisation and has been a reviewer for The Times Higher Education Supplement. He is currently a freelance teacher and lives in Twickenham in Greater London. He founded Theory of Music in 2007.

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Some artists who have used this translation

Music for a While

Music for a while is a Norwegian jazz quintet headed by cabaret diva Tora Augestad. Their album Graces that Refrain (Grappa Records, 2012) delivers chamber music/jazz transformations of classical songs. The translation in Schubert’s Wanderers of Der Leiermann from Schubert’s song cycle Die Winterreise is featured in the CD booklet.

Sarah Walker at Oxford Lieder Festival’s "Schubert Project 2014"

World renowned mezzo-soprano Sarah Walker CBE used the translation of Winterreise from the Theory of Music publication Schubert’s Wanderers (which this translation is taken from) at her Oxford Lieder Festival masterclass on 16 October 2014 at St. Columba’s Church, Alfred St. Oxford. See: http://www.oxfordlieder.co.uk/events/1280
SCHUBERT’S DIE WINTERREISE: ENGLISH TRANSLATION

Chapter 1 Introduction to Schubert’s Die Winterreise

An English translation of Schubert’s Die Winterreise, settings of poems by Wilhelm Müller and a synopsis of the story told by the poems.

The twenty-four poems of Die Winterreise were written in 1821 and 1822. The first twelve poems were published separately in 1823 and the cycle was published in full in 1824. Schubert made his settings of the poems in 1827.

These translations are in free verse and are designed to introduce readers to Schubert’s song cycle. I have ignored the original metrical scheme but have tried to make the translations as accurate as possible. I have also tried to use a vocabulary that suggests Romantic poetry.

Synopsis

Die Winterreise is primarily about feelings and atmosphere, but there is nevertheless a story, albeit told in a fragmented narrative. A young man, the hero (or anti-hero) of the poems, arrives in an idyllic town in May (Good Night). There he befriends a family of mother, father and daughter and is invited to live with them (Good Night). He falls in love with the daughter and his love is returned, or so he is led to believe (Feeling Numb). However, the daughter rejects him to marry a wealthy suitor with the approval of her parents (The Weathervane). It is now winter and the hero leaves his adopted home in the dead of night after writing a farewell message to his beloved (Good Night). As he leaves the town crows shower him with snow from the roofs (Looking Back) and he begins a painful journey, constantly tortured by memories of his past happiness (Frozen Tears, On the River, The Watercourse). On his journey he is joined by a raven, possibly symbolic of a death wish (The Raven). Eventually he arrives at another town (Solitude) where it seems he stays for some time as he writes of the post arriving there (The Post). The song cycle ends with a particularly bleak image. An organ-grinder or hurdy-gurdy man has a pitch near the town where he plies his trade ignored by the townspeople and harassed by dogs. It is ironic that in this final poem the poet asks if the hurdy-gurdy man will set the poet’s songs to music, an invitation that was ultimately accepted by Schubert.
Chapter 2

No. 1. Good Night (Gute Nacht), No. 2. The Weathervane (Die Wetterfahne), No. 3. Frozen Tears (Gefror’ne Thränen), No. 4. Feeling Numb (Erstarrung), No. 5. The Linden Tree (Der Lindenbaum)

*Die Winterreise* No. 1. Good Night (Gute Nacht)

As a stranger I arrived
As a stranger I shall leave
I remember a perfect day in May
How bright the flowers
How cool the breeze

The maiden spoke of love
The mother had kind words
But now the world is dreary
With a winter path before me

I can’t choose the season
To depart from this place
I won’t delay or ponder
I must begin my journey now

The bright moon lights my path
It will guide me on my road
I see the snow-covered meadow
I see where deer have trod
A voice within says – go now
Why linger and delay?
Leave the dogs to bay at the moon
Before her father’s gate

For love is a thing of changes
God has made it so
Ever-changing from old to new
God has made it so

So love delights in changes
Good night, my love, good night
Love is a thing of changes
Good night, my love, good night

I’ll not disturb your sleep
But I’ll write above your door
A simple farewell message
Good night, my love, good night

These are the last words spoken
Soon I’ll be out of sight
A simple farewell message
Good night, my love, good night
Die Winterreise No. 2. The Weathervane (Die Wetterfahne)

The wind is turning the weathervane
On the roof of my sweetheart's house
Round and round it mocks and teases
Teases and mocks my sighs and my tears

If only I'd seen this fickle symbol
Before I entered that house
I would not have hoped so much
Of one inconstant, though so fair

For Nature plays with our hearts
As the wind plays with the vane
What do they care if my heart is dying?
Their child will be a wealthy bride

Die Winterreise No. 3. Frozen Tears (Gefror’ne Thränen)

Some frozen tears
Cling to my face
Have I really been crying
And not noticed them flow?

Teardrops, heavy teardrops
What chills you through
What turns you into ice
Like drops of early dew?

From this poor bosom tears flow
Flow with burning heat
Flow enough to melt
The winter frost and snow

*Die Winterreise* No. 4. Feeling Numb (Erstarrung)

I look for traces of her footsteps
I look for them in vain
Where leaning on my arm
She crossed the bright green field

I'll kiss the wintry carpet
And with my scalding tears
Dissolve the freezing snow
I'll bring that field to life again

Do flowers still bloom?
Is the grass still green?
All the flowers have died
The grass is withered and thin

Earth, can you remind me
Of yesterday's happiness
When my sorrows fall silent
Who will speak to me of her?

It seems my heart is frozen
Her face etched on the ice
If my heart ever melts
Her face will fade away

Die Winterreise No. 5. The Linden Tree (Der Lindenbaum)

Before the doorway is a well
A linden tree stands there
Many times I’ve sought its shade
A place of rest and pleasant dreams

When dreaming there I carved
Some words of love upon the bark
Both joy and sorrow
Drew me to that shady spot

But now I must wander
Through this blackest night
In darkness I passed this tree
But couldn’t bear to look

I heard the branches rustle
As if they spoke to me
“Come to me my old friend
Come, find peace with me”

Cruel winds were blowing
Coldly cutting my face
My hat was blown behind me
I quickly sped on my way

I’m now many miles distant
From that dear old linden tree
But I still hear it whisper
“Come – find peace with me”
Chapter 3

No. 6. The Watercourse (Wasserfluth), No. 7. On the River (Auf dem Flusse), No. 8. Looking Back (Rückblick), No. 9. Will O’ the Wisp (Irrlicht), No. 10. Rest (Rast)

Die Winterreise No. 6. The Watercourse (Wasserfluth)

My tears have made
Deep marks in the snow
The cold flakes
Absorbing all my sorrows

When the grass begins to grow
And feels a warmer breeze
The swelling ice begins to break
And the sun melts the snow

Snow, you know of my yearnings
Tell me, where do you go?
Take my tears with you
As you flow to the stream

Flow through the town together
Go where the road leads
You’ll feel my hot tears
As you pass where my loved-one lives
River, once so restless
Flowing fast and bright
Why are you now so still
Lifeless, chilled and silent

A hard and icy case
Is now your winter prison
You lie cold and dreary
Pressed fast upon the earth

I’ll write upon your cover
With a pointed stone
My loved one’s name
A day and a time

The day when I first met her
The day when my love began
I’ll draw a broken ring
Around that name and date

Does my heart see
Your image in this river?
Does it swell and quiver
In its own icy case?
Die Winterreise No. 8. Looking Back (Rückblick)

It feels like I’m walking on fire
Though underfoot is ice and snow
I’ve hardly time to draw breath
So keen am I to leave that town

Every stone has made me stumble
In my haste to get away
From every roof I’ve passed
Crows have showered me with snow

How different when I arrived
How well you greeted me then
Your shining happy streets
Where the lark and nightingale sang

A linden tree whispered in the breeze
The murmur of the sparkling stream
Then the spell cast upon my heart
From a beautiful maiden’s eyes

Now when I think of that day
I’m tempted to turn and look back
To retrace my weary way
To stand before my loved one’s house
Die Winterreise No. 9. Will O’ the Wisp (Irrlicht)

Will O’ the Wisp has led me
Deep into a rocky maze
I look from right to left
I seek a path but there is none

I’m about to lose my way
All paths appear the same
Our joys and sorrows are no more real
Than this teasing phantom light

Through the gorge where the river rushed
I’ll calmly travel on
Every river flows to the sea
Every sorrow will come to an end

Die Winterreise No. 10. Rest (Rast)

At last I rest and only now
I feel weary

Nothing could tire me
While I pressed on
Over desolate winter paths
I was carried along as if on wings

It was too cold to stop

The winter wind helped me on my way

A helping hand on my back
Chapter 4

No. 11. Spring Dreams (Frühlingstraum), No. 12. Solitude (Einsamkeit), No.13. The Post (Die Post), No. 14. The Grey Head (Der greise Kopf), No. 15. The Raven (Die Krähe)

Die Winterreise No. 11. Spring Dreams (Frühlingstraum)

I had a dream of bright flowers
Bursting forth in May
I had a dream of a grassy meadow
With the sound of endless birdsong

When the cock crowed
I awoke in my bed
Everything was cold and dismal
The ravens croaked overhead

Who drew those leafy flowers
Upon the window pane?
Why do you mock the dreamer
Whose garden blooms in winter?

I had a dream of a lovely maiden
And of the love we shared
There were sweet kisses in the dream
And many blissful caresses
When the cock crowed
I started from my dreams
Now I'm sitting alone
With a memory of that dream

My eyes are closing again
Once more my heart begins to throb
Will the leaves ever turn green?
Will I ever embrace my sweetheart?

*Die Winterreise* No. 12. Solitude (Einsamkeit)

Dark clouds are drifting
Across the bright blue sky
Soft breezes gently sigh
In the dark forest

But in moody silence
I walk with sluggish feet
Alone and unnoticed
In this busy street

Why is the air so tranquil!
Why is the world so fair!
Even in the raging storm
I never felt such despair
Die Winterreise No. 13. The Post (Die Post)

The post-horn rings
Rings through the streets
Heart, where do these feelings come from?

The post has no news for me
So heart, why do you grieve?

The post has arrived
From the town
Where once, my heart
I loved so dearly

I'll ask the postman, Heart
If he has been to that town
And if he has seen
The fair one you loved

Die Winterreise No. 14. The Grey Head (Der greise Kopf)

A white sheen covers my head
A frost has done its work
I imagine I am old and grey
A pleasant dream for me
But then comes the thaw
My hair returns to black
Once more I am young
And peace is far away

They say one night of torment
Can make black hair turn white
The frost leaves my hair untouched
I have wandered but must wander more

*Die Winterreise* No. 15. The Raven (Die Krähe)

A raven has flown beside me
Since the day I left the town
Raven, bird of ill-omen
Will you ever leave me?

Do you stalk me
In the hope I will be yours?
My journey can't last much longer
My strength begins to fail

Raven, surely you will be true
Until death overtakes me
Chapter 5

No. 16. The Last Hope (Letzte Hoffnung), No. 17. In the Village (Im Dorfe), No. 18. The Stormy Morning (Der stürmische Morgen), No. 19. Illusion (Täuschung), No. 20. The Guide-Post (Der Wegweiser)

Die Winterreise No. 16. The Last Hope (Letzte Hoffnung)

A few gaudy leaves remain
On the winter branches
I shelter beneath
I begin to dream

I stare at one leaf
I stake my hopes on it
If the breeze moves it
I shiver and shake with fear

If the leaf falls
And flutters down
My hopes will fall with it
My heart will sink too
My last hope will be gone

Die Winterreise No. 17. In the Village (Im Dorfe)

The watchdogs are barking
And straining at their chains
The people are sleeping
And the village is at rest

What dreams they have
What joyful pleasures
Of good, of evil
According to their souls

But in the light of morning
Their treasures are all gone
What then?
They've had their fill
But hope in vain their dreams are real

Bark long, bark loud
My brave guards
The world sleeps
But gives me no rest!

My dreams have ended in tears
Why should I linger here?

*Die Winterreise* No. 18. The Stormy Morning (Der stürmische Morgen)

A storm has ripped
The grey robe of the sky
The clouds fly apart
In wild disorder
A flame reaches out and grasps the earth

The scene without, the soul within

One hot and fiery

The other cold and bleak

*Die Winterreise* No. 19. Illusion (Täuschung)

I see a flickering guiding light

To left and right, now here, now there

I’ll follow this light, though I know

It will mislead and tease me

Those who are lost, as I am

Will trust a friendly guiding light

That in the darkness, ice and snow

Shows the path to a welcoming house

I see a fair face within

This trickery is my gain

*Die Winterreise* No. 20. The Guide-Post (Der Wegweiser)

Why should I leave the beaten path

Where the other wanderers tread?

Why do I seek hidden tracks

On unmarked mountain snow?
I have injured no one
No need to shun mankind
It is only foolishness
That makes me seek the wild

At every crossing there is a post
It points towards the town
I will travel far beyond them
I’ll seek rest, but find none

I see a guide-post standing
Before my face it stands
It points me to a path
One no wanderer can retrace
Chapter 6

No. 21. The Wayside Inn (Das Wirthshaus), No. 22. Courage (Muth), No. 23. The Mock Suns (Die Nebensonnen), No. 24. The Organ-Grinder (Der Leiermann)

*Die Winterreise* No. 21. The Wayside Inn (Das Wirthshaus)

I’ve laboured upon my journey
A path to this lonely graveyard
I was looking for a welcoming inn
To rest my weary head

These green funeral wreaths
You could be the sign
That tells the tired traveller
That a cool retreat awaits

Among all your rooms
Do you have one for me?
I’m tired and ready to rest
Unwelcoming inn, do you deny me shelter?

*Die Winterreise* No. 22. Courage (Muth)

Snow falls on my cheek
I carelessly brush it away
If my heart speaks of its troubles
I’ll drown it out with a happy song
I won't listen to the heart's complaints
I won't listen to its fears
I'm content to wander
Through the wind and the snow

I have my trusty staff
I have my cheerful song
We will journey on together

_Die Winterreise_ No. 23. The Mock Suns (Die Nebensonnen)

I saw three suns in the bright cold sky
I stared at them long and hard
Unmoving they stared back at me
As if they would last forever

You three do not belong to me
Go and shine on others
I used to have three suns
But the best two have gone

If the third goes out
I will welcome the darkness
Die Winterreise No. 24. The Organ-Grinder (Der Leiermann)

Up behind the village
The organ-grinder has his pitch
He stands barefoot or shuffles
On the frozen ground

With stiff fingers
He coaxes out the sound
His saucer is empty
Gifts for him are rare

No one listens to him
Or looks at him, or cares
Dogs snarl at him
Dogs chase him

But he wears a smile
He shows no fear or disappointment
But turns the handle round and round

Shall I join you on your journey?
Will you play the music to my songs?