Women in Schubert’s Lieder: Exploring the Female Voice through His Songs

Abstract
This document explores Franz Schubert’s songs that feature women. These include his small but significant body of songs by female poets, 12 in all. In order to gain perspective on this often-overlooked body of songs, I examine the composer’s biographical, musical, and literary connections with women. Scholars and performers have long celebrated Schubert’s connection to poetry and keen ability to express musically the essence of each poem. (I will explore some of this research in later chapters, including the work of Susan Youens, Kristina Muxfeldt, and Michael Hall, among others.) By examining this body of songs as a whole, I aim to highlight specific ways that Schubert’s gifts lend themselves to the expression of the woman’s voice in song.
Schubert’s main contribution to the music world was through his Lieder. A Lied is a song for vocals and piano, telling a story based on a poem. Lieder are short songs, and it’s thought that Schubert’s short lieder were a big influence on Romantic composers creating shorter pieces. This practice wasn’t at all common in the Classical era. Schubert wrote over 600 Lieder in his lifetime, one of the most famous being the Erlkonig. He was one of the first composers to create “images” with piano, such as a galloping horse in Erlkonig. His use of harmony was very ahead of his time for a late-Classical Unlike his songs, which Schubert poured out whenever the inspiration struck him, the choral works were probably all the result of requests from performers. The vogue for such part-songs lasted little more than a century, fading and taking the repertoire with it into obscurity. Though there is much in this body of music that is less than first-rate, some of it is worthy of revival, particularly the hundred or so male quartets and choruses contributed by Schubert. Almost two-thirds of Schubert’s partsongs or choruses are for men’s voices, reflecting the essential child-rearing duties assigned to women in Biedermeier Europe. About a fifth are for mixed voices, and only half a dozen call for women’s voices. The remainder are either unison or unspecified.