

Schubert's relationship with the guitar is somewhat ambiguous and has been a source of contention. Some scholars believe that Schubert was in possession of a guitar and played the instrument himself in some capacity. However, the extent to which Schubert may or may not have been proficient on the instrument remains an open question, and accounts of Schubert primarily composing his accompaniments at the guitar (and only later arranging them for piano) seem to be complete falsehoods. Whether or not he was a player himself, Schubert was undoubtedly familiar with the instrument, as he was known to have been acquainted with several guitarists (both professional and amateur players), and composed guitar parts for at least three chamber works. He also would have frequently heard the guitar on the Viennese music scene, as it was a popular choice for accompanying voice during Schubert's time.

In fact, guitar arrangements of lieder were quite common, and several of Schubert's own pieces were published with guitar accompaniments, though these were most likely not prepared by Schubert himself. Some guitarists even set themselves the challenge of adapting Schubert's lieder to solo guitar, with J.K. Mertz's set of six Schubert lieder being perhaps the most widely known and successful effort.

Mertz's arrangements show how effective Schubert's music can be on guitar. Schubert's compositions frequently inhabit the unique paradox of both disarming folk-like simplicity, and incredible emotional depth. Indeed, there may be few composers whose music seems so sonically well suited to the expressive timbre of the guitar, which itself has deep connections to both folk and classical styles.

However, adapting Schubert's sophisticated harmonic language to a solo guitar presents many significant challenges, not to mention the musical and technical difficulties in realizing both the voice and piano parts of a lied on a solo guitar. These challenges place a far greater demand on the performer than most other guitar works of similar scale, which may explain why relatively few guitarists perform Mertz's full set of arrangements, and even fewer have attempted new transcriptions.

The present recording aims to dive into these challenging waters with two main goals. First, to consider how Mertz's arrangements could be further adapted to suit the modern guitar, and second to use Mertz's arrangements as a model to expand the guitar's repertoire with new lieder arrangements.

Mertz's arrangements (which make up the first six tracks on the album) primarily come from Schubert's late cycle *Schwanengesang*, with the exceptions of "Die Post," which is taken from *Winterreise*, and "Lob der Thränen," which is from an earlier set of songs. Mertz later revisited most of these songs in a version for guitar and voice, with the exception of "Lob der Thränen," which was replaced by "Die Taubenpost" (another song taken from *Schwanengesang*).

My set of arrangements somewhat mirrors Mertz's selections by consisting of four pieces from *Winterreise*, one stand-alone song, and a solo arrangement of "Die Taubenpost" (made using Mertz's guitar and voice version as a starting point).

Schubert's setting of "Das Fischermädchen" is harmonically lush and colorful. While still beautiful, Mertz's adaptation is significantly thinned out due to the guitar's technical restrictions, occasionally sacrificing the harmonic depth found in the original. The revised version presented here attempts to add depth to the texture by reworking the arrangement in the key of E with the third string tuned down a half-step to F# (a practice not common in Mertz's time). The new key and tuning allow for much more access to the guitar's open strings resulting in fuller harmonies and greater resonance.

In "Libesbothscraft" the poet speaks of sending his messages of love down a swift brook.

Schubert realizes this imagery in his musical setting with a quick light melody over constantly rushing thirty-second notes. Performing both the melody and sweeping piano arpeggios exactly as Schubert wrote them would be an impossible feat on solo guitar, so Mertz, unsurprisingly, reworked the texture significantly to suit the instrument. The version presented here is largely faithful to Mertz's transcription, however several measures omitted from Mertz's version have been reinserted, and a few small textural adjustments have been made to render certain melodic and bass figures more clearly.

"Lob der Thränen" is believed to have been composed around 1818, nearly 10 years earlier than most of the other songs in the present collection. Perhaps this explains the song's somewhat simpler character, though that is not to say the song does not have its own moments of powerful expression. The almost folk-like arpeggios in the accompaniment and the sentimental melody sound so natural on guitar that an un-initiated listener might easily believe it was written for the instrument.

Both the original text and Schubert's musical setting for "Aufenthalt" are charged with deep inner turmoil. While generally very effective, Mertz's arrangement makes several changes that seem to contradict Schubert's text setting. For instance, on the line "Hoch in den Kronen wogend sich's regt," (As the high treetops stir and heave,) Schubert sets the vocal line in a high register, which Mertz takes down an octave for technical ease. My revision of Mertz's arrangement reworks the texture in the hopes of conveying the original drama of Schubert's setting, and reinserts multiple measures omitted from Mertz's version.

"Ständchen" depicts the scene of a wistful poet serenading a potential lover. One can easily imagine how Schubert's beautiful setting casts the piano into the role of a guitar strumming along with the serenade. It is no surprise then that the piece sounds perfectly natural as a guitar arrangement, and may be the most frequently played of Mertz's Schubert arrangements. The first half of Mertz's transcription (adapted with relatively few changes here) follows Schubert's originals quite closely, while the second half borrows heavily from Liszt's solo piano version.

The galloping rhythms and horn like sounds of "Die Post" create a quite literal depiction of the post arriving by stagecoach. More metaphorically, they can also be heard as a depiction of the poet's excitement and hopes of receiving a letter from his beloved. However, no letter arrives and these hopes are dashed. Schubert reflects the poet's feelings of dejection with a shift to the minor mode and a more stepwise sorrowful melody in the second and forth stanzas.

"Die Taubenpost" is one of Schubert's latest songs (perhaps the last work he ever completed), yet it contrasts heavily with the dark tone and sophistication of many of his other late songs. Schubert's spirited melody and largely jaunty accompaniment give an atmosphere of delightful simplicity. Yet the beautiful subtlety of Schubert's harmonic language (in particular the brief tonicization of the minor mode when the pigeon's name is revealed to be longing) brilliantly hints at the sorrow hiding behind the poet's upbeat words.

Müller's text for "Erstarrung" describes the wanderer obsessively searching for a memento of his lost love in the snow. Schubert brilliantly reflects the wanderer's obsessive nature in his musical setting by continuously reusing and varying the bass melody heard in the opening, and by maintaining a constantly flowing triplet pattern. Incessantly repeating the triplets amidst the sweeping melodic gestures in the bass and vocal lines creates both an intense sensation of urgency, and an extreme technical challenge for a solo performer. The present arrangement draws inspiration from Franz Liszt's solo piano arrangement to adapt Schubert's dense texture into a thrilling display of virtuosity.

There may be no better representation of the intersection between simplicity and depth at the heart of Schubert than “Der Lindenbaum.” The pastoral atmosphere of the major mode sections conceals a deep inner turmoil that begins to surface in the second stanza’s minor mode. The inner conflict reaches its peak during an intense outburst of emotion during the storm section of the third stanza.

The melancholic and intimate character of “Wasserflut” lends itself beautifully to the guitar. Schubert’s original key of E minor is also conveniently idiomatic, as it allows for the full use of the guitar’s low register and open strings to maintain rich sonorities underneath the wide sweeping melodic line.

Schubert’s soft dynamics and articulated bass lines make “Auf dem Flusse” another piece whose character transitions well to the sound of the guitar, however the dense texture of Schubert’s intense climatic section near the end of the song requires an imaginative reworking to suit the instrument.

“Die Sterne” is one of three different poems of the same name (each by a different author) that Schubert set over his career. D. 176 is a relatively early song, composed when Schubert was just 18, and provides a charmingly pure, almost naïve, contrast to the dark intensity of the later Schubert lieder presented here. The beautifully simple melody and light glistening texture are perfectly suited to the sound of the guitar. Schubert set the song as a berceuse (a lullaby), providing a peaceful conclusion to the entire set.

Full texts and Translations for tracks 1-11 are available on Oxfordlieder.co.uk © Richard Wigmore used by permission. Text and translation for track 12 Die Sterne, is available on Lieder.net © Malcolm Wren used with permission from the Lieder.Net archive.