Proceeding of ICSPHS 2026 Symposium:Ethics, Law, and Psychology: Interdisciplinary Reconstruction of Humanities in Medicine
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.ZJU31520

Social Melancholy in "Goodnight" from Schubert's "Winterreise" Song Cycle

Beiyuan Zheng

PingHe High School, Shanghai, China
johanzheng_123@outlook.com

Abstract. The song cycle Winterreise by Frantz Schubert which was created in the period of the Restoration after the years of Napoleon is not only a masterpiece of the art of the song but also a piece of artwork which reflects the disappointment and social despondency of the time. The aim in this paper is to concentrate on Goodnight, a setting of Winterreise, to examine how this masterpiece, as a painting of the transition between classical formal beauty and Romantic inner expression, reflects the melancholy and disillusionment prevalent throughout Europe at the beginning of the 19 th century. The main techniques which are given attention to in this paper are recurring tonal shifts and rhythm in the song cycle. It claims that the solitary, wandering little man in the Goodnight by Schubert in his personalized narrative on emotions does not lie alone in defining the theme of heartbreak but also refers to a social psychological phenomenon, about the times, and brings the theme to the universal manifestation of social psychology in a particular historical context. This paper tries to show that music is not the result of aesthetics but also an emotional treasure trove that feels and defines the spirit of age. In Goodnight, Schubert manages to demonstrate the social melancholy of his era pervading the whole society through the mastery of musical tools.

Keywords: winterreise, social depression, musicology

1. Introduction

1.1. Research background

Composed during the Restoration period following the Napoleonic era, Franz Schubert's song cycle Winterreise is not only a landmark of the art song tradition but also a powerful artistic reflection of the widespread disappointment and social despondency of its time [1]. The theme of the relationship between the Goodnight by Schubert and the social melancholy of all the post-Napoleonic Restoration has become the classic suggestion in the sphere of musicology [2]. This paper will believe that it is the impossibility to study the gist of technicalities in Goodnight, i.e. the change in tonality and harmony and through this disclosure, researchers may obtain the underlying rationale of transformation of personal accountability into general lamentation. These factors play direct roles in the presentation of emotions, and they play a central part in discovering the emotional structure of the work [3]. This paper provides a relationship between social emotion and musical structure based

© 2026 The Authors. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.ZJU31520

on observable correspondence, which is how the elements of musical structure can be seen as emotional amplifiers, manipulating the personal loss into a social melancholy that is easily contagious by everyone in society, gaining a better understanding of the mechanisms through which music can enter social processes.

1.2. Literature review

This work is devoted to the musical text of Winterreise in itself, to the thorough analysis of the way this text represents Romanticism. The impact of Schubert on creatively directing the listeners to the intricate feelings of the complex and multifaceted nature of personal feelings in musical terms, scholars have already shown extensively. All these studies form the basis of the comprehension of the artistic value of this paper of Goodnight and its landmark on the history of musical style transforming between Classical and Romantic. Although what current studies are indicating macroscopically are the links between music and spirit of the times, it usually tends to be rather abstract on the matter of how certain musical methods captures, creates and shifts this socio-psychological background. The proposed paper seeks to fill this gap in the research of specific methods in this area.

1.3. Definition of terms

Social depression is a form of depression that is common among a population at certain social and historical circumstances.

A song cycle is a large scale vocal genre and comprises of multiple art songs that are structurally independent and also relate to each other in terms of plot. Such songs tend to have a single theme or thread of narrative and appeal to the progression of music to demonstrate the transformation of psychology and emotions of a given character.

1.4. Research methods

In the paper, the musical analysis with the examples of music and documentary analysis will be applied to explore the works and scores of the composer in detail. Through the details like the detailed transitions and chords, which Schubert uses repeatedly in his piece, it shall enhance how details in Goodnight express the emotions and the melancholic atmosphere of the social era, with an aim of proving that it has some relation to the social melancholy of the post-Napoleonic years. Such approaches represent their expression of emotions.

1.5. Research significance

The aspect of the connection between poetry and music and the manifestation of personal feelings has been the primary concern of prior research on the art songs created by Schubert. The purpose of this article is to unveil the fact that song cycles as Winterreise are deeper than the catharsis of personal feelings. Their narratives, which are very personalized, reach out to a great variety of social issues, including the psychological inability of power under political repressions. This transforms this genre, which is believed to be indoors based, with deep humanistic values and social criticism which enhances its ranking in music sociology studies.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.ZJU31520

2. Case analysis

2.1. Ritual of farewell: emotional descent in schubert's winterreise

Franz Schubert Winterreise (Winterreise), D. 911 is a song cycle by Franz Schubert, which is based on a poem by Wilhelm Miller, and is generally regarded as a masterpiece of the art song. It does not only show the wandering of a heartbroken lover in the cold winter but also goes deep into the inner world that ends up in the ultimate disillusionment. The first song, Goodnight, is expertly used as the prologue to this masterpiece of a tragedy. It is not an act of violence but a ceremony of parting that is brewing in a sober manner.

The outstanding tonal manipulations, the symbolic rhythmic patterns, and the close interplay between the piano and the vocals enabled Schubert to vividly reflect the essence of the contradiction of the poem, the undercurrent beneath the deep rhythm calm and make an outstanding impression upon the listeners about the social melancholy of the times.

2.2. Analysis

2.2.1. An indecisive step and an uncertain start

On measures 1 to 6 of the song (See Figure 1), the piano is heard playing a firm and cold rhythm in D minor which directly reflects the heavy footsteps of a traveler and symbolizes the heavy psychological burden of the traveler.

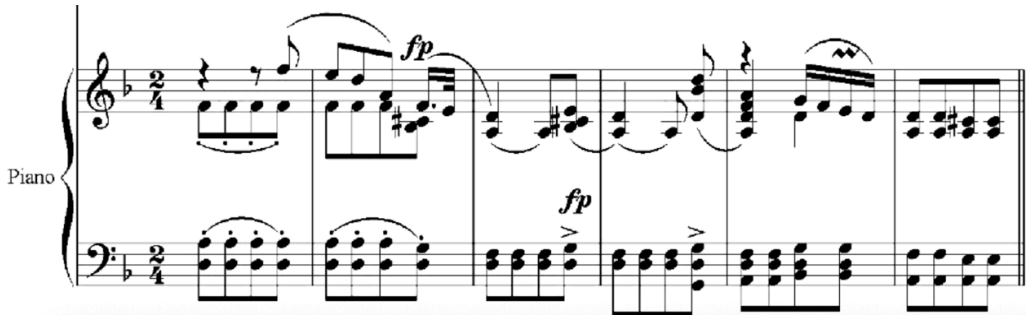

Figure 1: Bars 1 to 6 of the song

The accompaniment of the melody, the accompaniment of which Schubert then repeats with eighth notes, and the triplets, eighth notes, which the composer applies very often, symbolize the steps made by the characters in the snow and ice, and are the symbol of their inner hesitation and weight [4]. This gloomy expression is a contrast to the title of the article, Goodnight, which adds even more emphasis on the terror of the story presented by the character. This motif of rhythm, which goes through the composition, is like an inevitable drum beat of destiny setting a dark background over the entire cycle. But with the entry of the vocals, the tonality does not maintain in D minor, but it changes to its relative major, F major, singing the lyrics, "Fremd bin ich eingezogen, Fremd zieh" ich wieder aus. (I came as a stranger, stranger I came) This dialog between D minor and F major serves a very symbolical purpose. The tonality of D minor helps Schubert fill the whole emotion with the tragic motive and impression of cruelty and coldness of the reality. The next transition to F major appears to be the symbolic meaning of the self-consolation of the main character who has gone through the heartbreak; the bitterness is contrasted. This tonal vibration creates, from the first notes of the song, the internal problem of the main character regarding reality

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.ZJU31520

and memory, desolation and a moment of peace. It is not only the tonality and rhythm manipulation at the onset of the song that is striking, but it is rather the change of the melody that is more noticeable. The fact that Schubert inserted the descending scales in the main melody creates an impression of a long sigh of a tramp who lost his love and is alone. The arranger also enriches the image, using 2/4-time signature, which clearly demonstrates the desperation of the character and his/her emotional shades.

2.2.2. Piano and vocals duet and “may flowers”

In the 25 through 28 of the song Goodnight (Score 1.2), the music exhibits a high level of harmony between the music and the text.

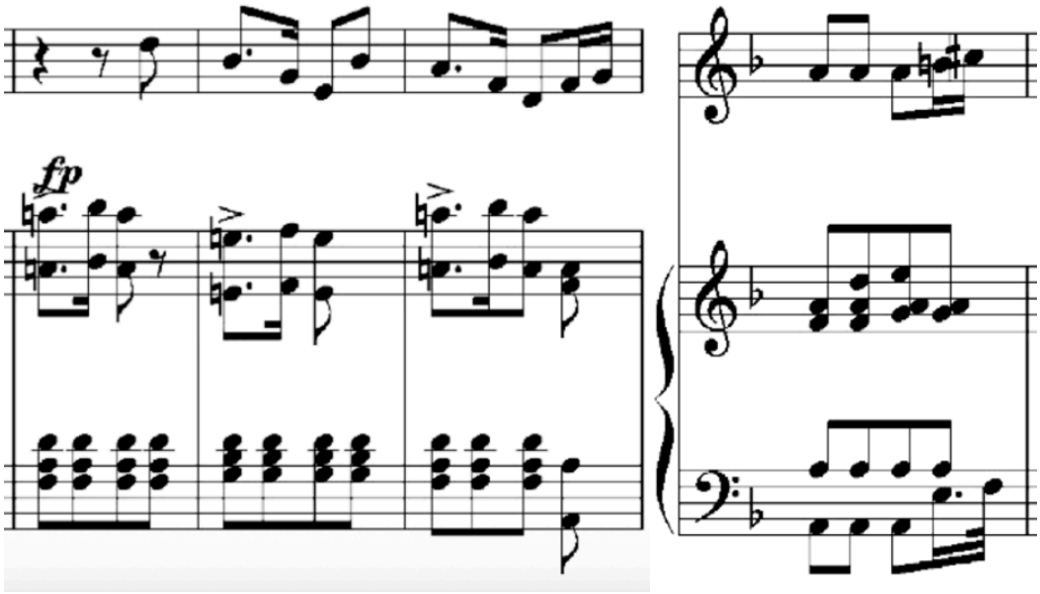

Figure 2: Bars 25 to 28 of Good Night

The narrative in “Goodnight” is not entirely tragic. When the homeless man recalls the beauty of the past, the lovely land, and the girl’s feelings, the song shifts from a minor key to a bright major key. When he sings, “Das Mädchen sprach von Liebe, Die Mutter gar von Eh” - “The girl spoke of love, her mother even of marriage”, the music briefly turns to a bright major key, and the piano texture becomes more fluid and gentler [5]. This passage expresses the protagonist’s fond recollections of the past, subtly conveying beauty in his heart.

Schubert’s use of chords in the piano accompaniment, with its lyrical and tender accompaniment, further enhances the atmosphere. Through this arrangement and accompaniment, Schubert allows the listener to better understand the protagonist’s memories and emotional depth. This makes the protagonist depicted in the music leave a deeper impression on the listener, helping Schubert express his widespread melancholy about post-Napoleonic society and connect the ordinary person to larger social phenomena.

The major key here contrasts sharply with the oppressive D minor before and after, like a window suddenly opening in the darkness, letting in a fleeting ray of sunlight from the past. The piano plays the role of “memory”, using warm accompaniment to depict “May flowers”. However, this beauty is fleeting. The following line, “She made vows of eternal love to me and gave me tokens of her affection”, while the melody remains in the high register, the harmony subtly shifts towards

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.ZJU31520

darkness, foreshadowing the illusion of their vows and foreshadowing the disillusionment to come [6].

Schubert, by weaving tender memories into the tragedy, vividly portrays the protagonist's melancholy [7]. The shifting tones symbolize the protagonist's inner struggles and fluctuations, allowing listeners to empathize and transforming the work into a vehicle for universally relatable emotions. The piano part then uses "f p" to pull the wanderer back from beautiful memories to cold reality, and a sense of desolation once again takes hold of the protagonist's heart, causing the theme of the whole work to return to melancholy and the sorrow brought by heartbreak.

2.2.3. A resolute farewell: the completion of the emotional context

From measure 45 to measure 48, the song reaches its climax due to the convergence of harmonic tension and emotional outburst (See Figure 3).

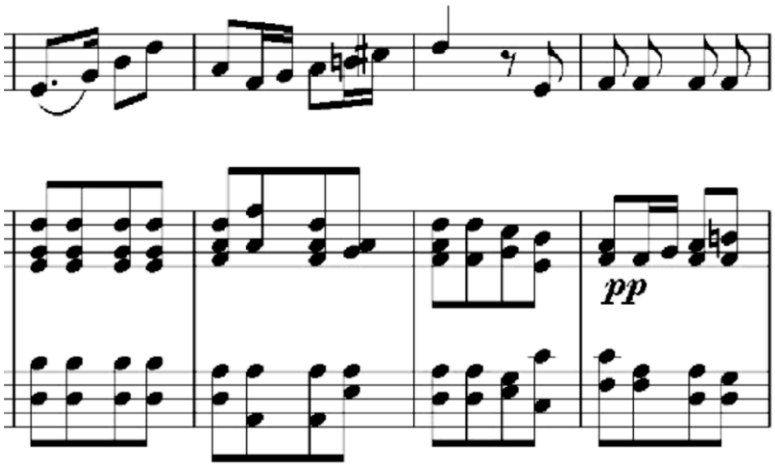

Figure 3: Bars 45-48 of the Song

The turning point and climax of the song finds its outlet when the protagonist decides to move out. The music becomes virtually a recitative when Ir Singst of "Was soll ich langer weile, Dass man mich trieb hinaus?" The tune loses its singing potential, the rhythm turns liberated, chasing up and down of the words, revealing drama of the raving conflict between the protagonist and his inner resolution [8].

In this case, Schubert enhances the discomfort and the heartache that is created by the music with unbelievably tension-filled chords. Using a variety of unresolved dominant chords, the arranger gives the impression of melancholy and suspense. This rhythm is not well defined with series of unresolved chords, such as the repeated major and minor second degrees in this case makes the rhythm less strict or oppressed just like the psychology of the protagonist in the context of the masses and so the masses were confused during the Restoration period. Variations in rhythm used are to communicate emotions in the work. The value of the notes is usually extended or stressed to highlight the inner soul pain of the main character.

In the end of the song, Schubert surprises people with the transition of D minor into D major, which, as this article regards the transition, is the culmination and the most beautiful point of the composition. The development when the dominant chord of D major is changed to the tonic chord introduces an outstanding brightness [9]. Nevertheless, if the sunny D major tonic chord of the song goes off in harmony with the words of the song Goodbye, it does not produce a feeling of warmth,

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.ZJU31520

but irony with a suffocating sense to the words. This literal display of art is also a common occurrence of the Romantic era. This D-major does not provide any consolation; it is rather a cold and dead moon on a winter night and generates a visual effect of brightness and austerity. It shows a serenity of complete despair, of a serenity without delusions. It is less vivid and an in-depth manner of emotion. This personal agony gives the work a strong depth, it is more of a tangible embodiment of the omnipresence of social melancholy in the post-Napoleonic period, which is also embodied in the protagonist of this work. This hero is not only a representative of an individual, but also a representative of society. The community soul is clearly lamented in this work.

At the completing part of the song, Schubert gradually softens the vocals in a very small voice, letting the piano play to its usual beginning of the song the walking motif so as to create a link between the beginning and the end. Once again, this is done in technique and symbolism to steer the personal narrative towards social emotions.

2.3. Discussion

"Goodnight" is much more than a good night or a wanderer, a broken heart. When describing specific details Schubert provides, implying the unwinding nature of different chords, he leaves some suspense in the mind of the listener. He builds a contrast between memory and reality in contrast between D minor, F major, and A major; in the repetitive rhythmic figure of the wanderer as a restless creature; and the ultimate transition of D minor into D major that promotes despair to sick suffocation. This general sadness that can be traced in the lives of middle classes is depicted in a live picture in this miniature play. By reinforcing rhythmic motifs and reshaping the narrative perspective, the poem intensifies emotional expression and redefines its meaning, elevating Miller's personal tragedy into a broader articulation of post-Napoleonic social disillusionment, individual alienation, and anxiety about the future [10].

3. Conclusion

This paper clearly demonstrates that the core musical techniques Schubert employed in "Goodnight" form a precise isomorphic relationship with the psychological characteristics of social melancholy. Firstly, the tonal shifts and wanderings (such as the stark reality of D minor versus the phantom memories of F major and A major) not only reflect the protagonist's inner struggle but also metaphorically represent the prevailing mental state of intellectuals and the urban middle class of that era: a sense of disorientation between the oppressive reality of the Restoration period and the nostalgia for lost Enlightenment ideals and revolutionary passion. This "uncertain beginning" is a microcosm of the entire era's sense of disorientation.

Secondly, the symbolism of the rhythmic motif runs throughout. The fixed rhythmic pattern that imitates heavy footsteps is not only the drumbeat of the wanderer's personal fate but also symbolizes an unstoppable era of exile. This accompaniment does not symbolize hope, but rather the loneliness of an individual forced to "move" in a social environment where there is no way out.

Finally, and most exquisitely, lies the dramatic shift to D major. The rhythmic disintegration and harmonic suspension in the section vividly portray the individual's powerlessness under immense social pressure. The unexpected transition to D major at the end elevates despair to a cold, serene calm. This disillusionment is the deep core of social melancholy: not intense grief, but the numbness and acceptance that follows the exhaustion of all hope. Schubert uses this to demonstrate that the deepest sorrow is not necessarily pain, but sometimes the calm of despair.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.ZJU31520

Based on the above analysis, the core argument of this paper is established: Schubert successfully elevated the tragedy of the "little man" to the lament of the "great era" by placing a highly personalized narrative of heartbreak within an extremely precise musical structure full of inner tension. The wanderer in "Goodnight" thus becomes an allegorical figure of the era, symbolizing the shared psychological state of individuals under political and social pressure during the Restoration period.

His melancholy, his hesitation, his resolute decision, and his ultimate disillusionment no longer belong merely to a fictional poetic character but have become an "emotional structure" that could be perceived and internalized by a wide audience at the time, comprised of factors such as tonal structure, rhythmic motifs, and harmonic tension. By strengthening rhythmic motifs and reinterpreting narrative, the poem amplifies emotions and transforms meaning, turning the personal tragedy in Miller's poetry into a profound expression of the social emotions of disillusionment with ideals, individual alienation, and uncertainty about the future prevalent in the post-Napoleonic era.

References

[1] Grace, P. (2025). Winterreise: Winter journey.
[2] Hu, R. (2021). A study of the piano accompaniment in Schubert's song cycle Winterreise (Master's thesis). Henan University.
[3] Zhu, J. (2024). The emotional, developmental, social, and positive intersectionalities between music and psychology: A thorough investigation of the relationship between music and the mind. Res. Comment. Humanit. Arts, 2(10).
[4] Wang, F. (2012). An interpretation of the tragic aesthetics of Schubert's song cycle Winterreise (Master's thesis). China Conservatory of Music.
[5] Xu, P. (2007). An appreciation of "Gute Nacht" from Schubert's song cycle Winterreise. Sci. Technol. Inf. (Sci. Educ.), (36), 228–229.
[6] Everett, W. (1990). Grief in Winterreise: A Schenkerian perspective. Music Anal., 9(2), 157–175.
[7] Weiß, C., et al. (2021). Schubert Winterreise dataset: A multimodal scenario for music analysis. J. Comput. Cult. Herit., 14(2), 1–18.
[8] Zhao, M. (2021). On the artistic characteristics of Schubert's art song Winterreise: Taking the first song "Gute Nacht" as an example. Music World, (5), 52–55.
[9] Sprau, K. (2021). Measured wandering: On the performative realization of tempo–meter correspondences in Schubert's Winterreise. Z. Ges. Musiktheorie, 18(Special Issue), 433–478.
[10] Schubert. (2005). Schubert. Beijing: People's Music Publishing House.