

*Department of Musicology
Faculty of Music*

SOUND

International Journal of Music

60

Belgrade, II/2022

NEW WORKS

Ljubica Ilić

- On Musical Memory in Đorđe Marković's *Monuments:
Overture for Peace* 135

ANALYTICAL PERSPECTIVES

Laura Emmery

- Jonathan Harvey's String Trio: The Rustic and the Sacred 149

VIEWS

Borislav Čičovački

- The Oeuvre of Isidora Žebeljan – Survey, Classification,
Specificities, and Significance 177

RESEARCH AND TRADITION

Marijana Kokanović Marković

- Union is Strength* – “A Balkan Hymn” by Kalman Roth-Ronay at
The Hague Peace Conference (1899) in the Context of Anglo-Serbian
Cultural and Political Relations 199

Chris Walton

- Beethoven's Blue Remembered Hills 221

Joevan de Mattos Caitano

- Internationale Ferienkurse für Neue Musik in Darmstadt
from the Yugoslav Perspectives 229

“STANA ĐURIĆ-KLAJN” AWARD

Milena Medić

- Music before the Mind's Eyes: the Sublime Practice of *Musica Reservata*
and *Seconda Prattica* in the Light of the Transformative
Ludus Performing and Listening Experience 269

Article received on October 20th 2022
Article accepted on November 30th 2022
Original scientific paper

UDC 78.071.1 Бетовен Л.
781

DOI 10.5937/news02260221W

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BEETHOVEN'S BLUE REMEMBERED HILLS

Abstract: Various commentators have noted Beethoven's use of a monotone in the second song of his cycle *An die ferne Geliebte*, where the repetition of a single note serves to conjure up the power of memory. This monotone served as a model for several subsequent composers of song cycles, often in a similar context when their singer/narrator recalls things that are past – from Peter Cornelius to Arnold Bax. In the case of Arthur Somervell's *A Shropshire Lad*, a further correlation is found between his poet's "blue-remembered hills" and Beethoven's "Berge so blau".

Keywords: An die ferne Geliebte, Song cycle, Monotone, Ludwig van Beethoven, Arthur Somervell

The monotone has rarely been afforded much attention by the musicological community. This is hardly surprising, as it is by definition a thing divorced from certain parameters of music that usually engage our interest (primarily melody and rhythm). Its use in music was long reserved for chanting in church, and then it found a new home in the rapid recitative of opera. However, its use by one of the great masters of the early 19th century gave it a new lease of life in the song cycle, and it thereafter exerted a considerable influence on other composers working in the same genre. I refer here to Ludwig

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van Beethoven's *An die ferne Geliebte*, the first-ever song cycle, composed to poems by one Alois Jeitteles in early 1816. With its central poetic topic (the absence of the beloved), its circular, carefully devised key scheme, its use of thematic variation, its interlinking passages between the songs and the return of its opening music at the close, it provided a model song cycle by which other composers might measure themselves for many decades to come. When the first dictionary article was finally published on the "song cycle" half a century later, in Arrey von Dommer's revised edition of Koch's *Musikalisches Lexicon*, it essentially described *An die ferne Geliebte*, albeit without actually naming it.¹

The second song in *An die ferne Geliebte* uses music reminiscent of horn calls to conjure up a pastoral scene. The text runs: "Wo die Berge so blau / Aus dem nebligen Grau / Schauen herein, / Wo die Sonne verglüht, / Wo die Wolke umzieht, / Möchte ich sein!" (Where the mountains so blue look out of the misty greyness, where the sun's glow dies away, where the clouds flit by, that's where I'd like to be!). The voice and the right hand of the piano share the melody here; but for the ensuing lines, the piano alone has the tune, with the voice singing a monotone (see Example 1): "Dort im ruhigen Tal / Schweigen Schmerzen und Qual. / Wo im Gestein / Still die Primel dort sinnt, / Weht so leise der Wind, / Möchte ich sein!" (There in the peaceful valley, pain and anguish fall silent. There, in the rocks, the primrose ponders silently and the wind blows so gently: That's where I'd like to be!).

This passage was once singled out by Charles Rosen, who noted that by "[restricting] the voice to a single note", it seems "as if the lover, now completely passive, is submitting almost involuntarily to the incursion of memory".²

While the circular construction of Beethoven's cycle left its mark on later generations, this particular song seems to have embarked on its own cycle of influence. One might argue that "Der Leiermann", the final song of Schubert's *Winterreise*, in which memory and reality also intermingle, in part achieves its effect by transporting Beethoven's monotone into the bass as the drone of the hurdy-gurdy. But there are other examples of a monotone in later song cycles that seem to refer back quite specifically to *An die ferne Geliebte* and the manner in which its second song toys with memory. The most obvious

¹ "Liederkreis, Liedercyclus", in: Heinrich Koch, *Musikalisches Lexicon*, 2nd ed. by Arrey von Dommer, Heidelberg, Mohr, 1865, 513–514.

² Charles Rosen, *The Romantic Generation*, London, Fontana Press, 1999, 169.

Example 1: Beethoven, *An die ferne Geliebte* op. 98, second song
Poco allegretto

Dort im ru - higen Talschweigen Schmer-zen und Qual. Wo im Ge-
stein still die Pri - mel dort sinnt, weht so lei - - se der Wind, möch-te ich sein!

pp *pp* *pp* *pp* *pp*

Red. *

case within the German-language tradition is the third song, “Ein Ton” (A note) in *Trauer und Trost* op. 3 by Peter Cornelius, a song cycle to six of his own poems, composed in Weimar in 1854. The poet here imagines that his beloved – whom we learnt in the first song has died – has returned to sing his woes to sleep (see Example 2); it begins: “Mir klingt ein Ton so wunderbar / In Herz und Sinnen immerdar. / Ist es der Hauch, der Dir entschwebt, / Als einmal noch Dein Mund gebebt?” (I hear a note that is so wonderful / continually, in my heart and mind. / Is it a breath, wafting from you / as your mouth trembles once more?). The vocal line throughout the song is kept to a single note, with the musical argument given over completely to the piano. Unlike in Beethoven, however, the piano does not play a melody we have already heard (though the opening notes, spanning the descending minor triad b-g-e, are admittedly reminiscent of the previous two songs). But in its recall of a distant beloved (distant because deceased) and in transporting the past into the present, it is clearly reliant on Beethoven as a model (it is interesting that the two other composers who set this same poem to music, Carl Nosedá and Charles Ives, avoided copying Cornelius’s use of a monotone).

Example 2: Peter Cornelius: *Trauer und Trost* op. 3, third song

Mir klingt ein Ton so wunder - bar In Herz und
I hear a tone so won.drous sweet In heart and

In “At the last”, the final song of his *Celtic Song Cycle* of 1904 to poems by Fiona Macleod (actually a pseudonym of the Scottish writer William Sharp), the English composer Arnold Bax also employs a monotone almost throughout to convey memory and the passing of time (“She cometh no more: Time too is dead”, it begins). It is, however, a very early work (he was just 21 when he wrote it) and worthy of mention here primarily for documentary purposes, as it is full of rather poorly digested Wagnerian reminiscences. There are nevertheless two further examples of a composer using a monotone in a song cycle that are of greater interest to us here, because they both have a clear connection back to Beethoven.

In *Lebendig begraben* op. 40 of 1926, his setting of a poetic cycle by Gottfried Keller in which the narrator is a man buried alive, Othmar Schoeck sets the fifth poem largely as a monotone over a passacaglia bass (see Example 3). The narrator in his coffin hears the sexton come home, drunk, to be dragged inside by his wife: “Horch! Stimmen und Geschrei, doch kaum zu hören ... Der trunkne Küster, aus der Schenke kommen / Setzt sich noch in den Mondschein vor dem Hause, / Kräht einen Psalm; doch kaum hat sie’s vernommen, / So stürzt sein Weib hervor, dass sie ihn zause ... Die Tür schlägt zu – der Lärm hat sich verloren, / Es hülfe nichts, wenn ich zu Tod mich rief!” (“Listen! Voices and yelling, though barely audible ... the drunken sexton coming from the pub sits down before his house in the moonlight / crows a psalm, but barely has she heard it than his wife rushes out and grabs him by the hair ... the door slams shut – the noise has gone, it wouldn’t help if I shouted myself to death!).

Example 3: Othmar Schoeck, *Lebendig begraben* op. 40, fifth song
Breit

The monotone here is presumably mock-ecclesiastical in intent (after all, the sexton “crows a psalm”). Memory here is absent – the immediacy is underlined as the orchestra mimics the wife’s cries and the slamming of the door in a direct manner that presages “Mickey Mousing”. But the fact that Schoeck was an admirer of Beethoven’s *An die ferne Geliebte* leaves little doubt that this composer’s monotone was at the back of Schoeck’s mind when he wrote this song (Schoeck accompanied Beethoven’s cycle several times, and in conversation with his nephew he once even described it as “the best cycle of all”).³

Our final example here has an even more direct connection to Beethoven than Schoeck or Cornelius. In his song cycle *A Shropshire Lad* (1904) to poems by A. E. Housman, Arthur Somervell sets the first strophe of his penultimate song, “Into my heart an air that kills” to a repeated B flat while the piano recapitulates the music of the cycle’s opening song (“Loveliest of trees, the cherry now”; see Example 4). The effect is similar to that achieved by the second song in Beethoven’s *An die ferne Geliebte*. By presenting music that we have

³ Conversation between the present writer and Georg Schoeck, the composer’s nephew, 1990.

already heard while the singer intones a single note, the song suggests – to quote Rosen, out of context this time – that the narrator, “completely passive, is submitting almost involuntarily to the incursion of memory”. In this case, the poem leaves no doubt that the narrator’s memory has been prompted by seeing the landscapes of his youth, as he himself confirms in the second strophe, “the happy highways where I went / And cannot come again”. But there is also something specific here that connects us directly with Beethoven. In what has become one of the most famous, most often-quoted lines of English poetry, the narrator asks: “What are those blue remembered hills?”

Example 4: Arthur Somervell, *A Shropshire Lad*, ninth song

The musical score is presented in three systems. Each system features a vocal line on a single staff and a piano accompaniment on two staves (treble and bass clef). The key signature is G minor (three flats) and the time signature is 3/4. The tempo is marked 'Andante sostenuto' and the dynamics are 'pp' (pianissimo). The lyrics are: 'In-to my heart an air that kills From yon far coun - try blows: What are those blue re - member'd hills, What spires, what farms are'.

As a former pupil of Uppingham School and a student of King's College, Cambridge, Somervell will have heard monotones in a religious setting on a near-daily basis in his youth, depending on the context and the choices of his clerics and choirmasters. Monotones are namely a standard feature of psalms and collects in the Anglican Church. But Somervell had also studied under Friedrich Kiel and Woldemar Bargiel at the Hochschule für Musik in Berlin in the mid-1880s, where he will have been given a thorough grounding in the Austro-German tradition; in short, he will have been steeped in Beethoven there. The monotone in *A Shropshire Lad* is especially notable, not just because this song too deals with memory and loss, but because its words offer a concrete reminiscence of the text of the second song of *An die ferne Geliebte*. Just before Beethoven begins his monotone, the singer describes “die Berge so blau” (“the mountains so blue”). It seems likely that this textual correlation between Jeitteles and Housman’s “blue remembered hills” was a chance occurrence. The latter supposedly had little interest in music,⁴ and it seems unlikely that he would have paid any attention to the poems that Beethoven set to music. There are also enough instances of “blue mountains” in literature and in real life for Housman to have needed no prompting from another poet in his use of colour adjectives.⁵ But the musical similarities between the two songs are a different matter. Given that Somervell knew his Beethoven, we can with confidence assert that Housman’s turn of phrase must have triggered a memory of Beethoven’s “Berge so blau”, inspiring Somervell in turn to employ the same musical means as his predecessor: a recapitulation of music already heard while the voice reminisces on a single note. The “blue remembered hills” recalled by Somervell’s “Shropshire lad” are thus not Housman’s Malverns in central England, but Beethoven’s hills, a thousand miles away in Austria.

⁴ See, e.g., William White, “A. E. Housman and Music”, *Music & Letters* 24/4, October 1943, 208–219.

⁵ See, for example, the Blue Mountains outside Sydney in Australia, the Blue Mountains of Pennsylvania in the USA, and Bloubergstrand (“blue mountain beach”) outside Cape Town in South Africa.

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