

The Stillness of Time, the Fullness of Space: Four Settings of Goethe's "Wandrer's Nachtlied"

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"Wandrer's Nachtlied II"

Über allen Gipfeln
Ist Ruh,
In allen Wipfeln
Spürest du
Kaum einen Hauch;
Die Vögelein schweigen im Walde.
Warte nur, balde
Ruhest du auch.

(Over every mountaintop
Is peace,
In every treetop
You perceive
Barely a breath;
The birds in the wood fall silent.
Wait a bit, soon now
You too will rest.)

It has been called the most perfect poem in the German language. Goethe dated it 6 September 1780, not long after his thirty-first birthday. He

copied it out, famously, on the wall of a cabin in the woods, leaving generations of poetry lovers to imagine him peering out at mountaintop and forest canopy, listening to the dying sounds of twilight. Some fifty years later he revisited the site, discovered the verse he wrote there as a young man, and experienced the poignant arc between his distant selves. Of course, he wept: who wouldn't?

Goethe's poem is about the tug on the soul of great distances, of the silence of evening, the gathering of twilight. In less than forty syllables spread among eight brief lines, Goethe captures a hushed and progressive epiphany. The quiet peace of nature's distant spaces becomes the peace of the space around you, the peace that will soon be within you and forever. Goethe stages the magical transition into twilight as a wave of quietude, from mountaintop through treetop to the human subject addressed by the poem, and thus as a kind of deepening awareness. Only when the finite noise of daily

life dies down, can we become aware of time and space as the infinite coordinates of our existence. And only when we die can we become this infinity ourselves.

Critical consensus about the poem's perfection is motivated by its stunning economy, the way every word answers. Just as the poem's content presents the gathering of twilight as a gathering of rest, of silence, and of distance, the sounds of the poem also gather and do so at different levels. Rhyme itself is a kind of gathering, and here "Wipfeln" in line 3 gathers "Gipfeln" in line 1, "du" in line 4 gathers "Ruh" in line 2, "auch" at the end gathers "Hauch" in the middle. Fuller rhythmic echoes also abound: "warte nur balde" is a rhythmic echo of "schweigen im Walde," just as "ruhest du auch" echoes "kaum einen Hauch."

Subtle accelerandos and ritardandos animate the poem. The first two lines slow down as "Gipfeln" moves into "Ruh," as though from sixteenth notes to triplets: 1 2 3 4, 1 2 3, 1. This presents the thought of rest as a gradual process of coming to rest. The third line then speeds up to its main word "Wipfeln": with only three syllables before "Wipfeln," this quickening contrasts with the more stately first line. I like to think of this as a rhythmic equivalent to our parallax vision (which allows us to see in three dimensions): the "Wipfeln" are closer to our face than the distant "Gipfeln."

The rhythmic disparity between line 1 (with six syllables) and line 3 (with five syllables) is balanced by the syllable counts in lines 2 (two syllables) and 4 (three syllables), such that each pair of lines contains eight syllables. The subtle balancing of lines 1–2 with lines 3–4 is also enhanced by the fact that "Spürest du" in line 4 echoes and gathers "ist Ruh" from line 2. But whereas the first two lines enjoy the self-sufficiency of a closed thought, line 4 spills over to the next line: "spürest du Kaum einen Hauch." This fifth line pulls us up short. Rhythmically it begins and ends with a downbeat: 1 2 3 1. The line is also self-contained and isolated sonically, framed by "kaum" and "Hauch," with the "au" sound as a new vowel sound in the poem. "Hauch" gathers "kaum," rounding out the line and contributing to the effect of being pulled up short.

"Hauch" itself will not fully resolve until the

end of the poem—its fully closural downbeat rhyme doesn't sound until the very end, so it is like a held breath. In fact, the word "Hauch" means breath and it enacts what it means: to say the word "Hauch" is to create a "Hauch." Goethe's semicolon at the end of line 5 leads locally to the next line as to the next clause. The semicolon after "Hauch" has a larger-level agenda as well, for it leads globally—like a half cadence—to the final period at the end of the poem: "Kaum einen Hauch; Ruhest du auch." In short: the syntax of line 5 is answered in line 6; while the sound of line 5 is answered in line 8.

Those are some of the effects of "Hauch" and its semicolon. The rest of line 5's rhythm (the dactylic "kaum einen") sounds twice in the long line 6, in the word "Vögelein" and the phrase "Schweigen im." So we hear a double echo. Again taking this process of echoing as a kind of gathering (in the sense of a later sound "gathering in" an earlier sound), we discover that this process of word-gathering-word and phrase-gathering-phrase continues on in the final two lines of the poem: "Warte" in line 7 gathers the initial sounds of "Walde"; "Warte nur, balde" gathers the rhythm of "schweigen im Walde"; and "balde" of course gathers "Walde." The entire line "Warte nur, balde" is also an expansion from within of "Walde": *Wa [rte nur B] alde*. And finally the last line, line 8, does the most gathering of all: Ruhest (Ruh from line 2, and spürest from line 4) du (du, line 4, and Ruh, line 2) auch (Hauch, line 5). The rhythm of "Ruhest du auch" furthermore gathers the whole of line 5, "kaum einen Hauch."

Let's return to that long line 6, which ends the first sentence of the poem. The Greek musicologist Thrasybulos Georgiades talked about the "swinging movement" of this line, its "song-like form," so unlike that of the rest of the poem.¹ Indeed, "Die Vögelein schweigen im

¹Georgiades goes on to claim that "it is only the interruption caused by the change in rhythm and conceptual direction of this single line that lends the poem its depth and its greatness." See Thrasybulos Georgiades, "Lyric as Musical Structure: Schubert's *Wandrer's Nachtlid* ('Über allen Gipfeln,' D. 768)," trans. Marie Louise Göllner, in *Schubert: Critical and Analytical Studies*, ed. Walter Frisch (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 85–86.

Walde" sounds like a line that could open a poem in a brighter, more folksy tone. But in Goethe's poem this line closes a thought; in Goethe's poem it is the sound of sound falling silent. In addition to presenting the symbolic action of birds falling silent, the line's animated rhythm seems to slow down through the course of the line: the diminutive "Vögelein" moves more fleetly than "schweigen," which sounds like a blanket; and the prepositional phrase "im Walde" has several warm sounds that require some time to enunciate.

At nine syllables in length, line 6 is by far the longest line in the poem. In fact, it pays to count all the syllables in this poem, as diagrammed line by line in figure 1. In lines 2, 4, and 5 there is an additive progression from 1 2 to 1 2 3 to 1 2 3 4. This is countered by the reduction that takes place in lines 1, 3, and 5, from six syllables, to five syllables, to four syllables. These two trajectories—one adding syllables, one subtracting syllables—meet in line 5 (are gathered there). By reading each in turn (lines 2, 4, 5 followed by lines 1, 3 5), then both together (lines 1–5), one can hear how "kaum einen Hauch" simultaneously completes both trajectories. In this sense, "Kaum einen Hauch" seems to hold the entire beginning of the poem within itself. This is another reason why the relatively long-breathed line 6 sounds right: it comes as a release of all that held tension.

Lines Syllables and Punctuation

1	1 2 3 4 5 6
2	1 2,
3	1 2 3 4 5
4	1 2 3
5	1 2 3 4;
6	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9.
7	1 2 3 4 5
8	1 2 3 4.

Figure 1: Syllable count, line by line, of Goethe's "Wandrer's Nachtlid II."

There are similarly interesting patterns after line 6. The reductive trajectory of lines 1, 3, and 5 is echoed in lines 7 and 8 (an effect that

can be heard by reading lines 1, 3, 5, 7, and 8). The progressive trajectory of lines 2, 4, and 5 grows to line 7 then recedes in line 8 (audible in reading lines 2, 4, 5, 7, and 8). So line 8, like line 5, gathers up these several trajectories—and it also answers line 5, providing the final period to line 5's semicolon.

Various rhythmic groupings in the poem follow a logic of accrual, as diagrammed in figure 2. As mentioned above, lines 1–2 and 3–4 have the same number of syllables, differently distributed (this is shown in the first two lines of figure 2). Line 5 echoes the rhythm of line 1 moving into 2 (with the 1 2 3 1 grouping on the words "Gipfeln ist Ruh"). The figure 1 2 3 1 happens fully three times: "Gipfeln ist Ruh," "Kaum einen Hauch," and "Ruhst du auch."

Lines 1 and 2	1 2 3 4 1 2 3 1,
Lines 3 and 4	1 2 3 1 2 1 2 3
Line 5	1 2 3 1;
Line 6	1 1 2 3 1 2 3 1 2.
Line 7	1 2 3, 1 2
Line 8	1 2 3 1.

Figure 2: Rhythmic groupings in Goethe's "Wandrer's Nachtlid II."

ZELTER

Perhaps it was with these triplet rhythms in mind that Goethe's composer friend Carl Friedrich Zelter set to work on his setting of the poem, composed in 1814 and published in 1821 under the title "Ruhe" (see ex. 1). The song begins with three and a half precluding measures that present four short phrases, all composed of triplets. On the downbeat of each full measure we hear the 1 2 3 1 figure, followed by two eighth notes of silence. This profusion of triplets is made possible by the $\frac{12}{8}$ meter, whose slow tempo and character designation ("Still und nachtlich") suggest a lullaby-like effect.

Zelter's text setting is straightforward: the only word repetitions are two extra iterations of "balde." Three fermatas help articulate the first part of the song. The first of these allows the first two lines to linger in the ear; the

Still und nachtlich

Ü - ber al - len Gip - feln ist

Ruh, in al - len Wip - feln spü - rest du kaum ei - - - hen

Hauch. die Vög - lein schwei - gen im Wal - de war - te nur, bal - de, bal - de,

bal - de ruhst du auch.

Example 1: Carl Friedrich Zelter, *Ruhe*.

second, on the word “einen,” accommodates an ornamental melisma, a cadenza that moves to the dominant on “Hauch”; and the third, after “Hauch,” allows this dominant to function as a harmonic fulcrum for the entire song. The song thus transforms Goethe’s poem into a binary form, with the semicolon on “Hauch” as the midpoint. The renewal of E major after the structural dominant delivers the more discursive line 6 with a rising melodic sixth to send it off. Both tonally and melodically, Zelter promotes a latent sense of line 6 as a potential beginning.

The final word of the poem, “auch,” falls on a V^7/IV —in other words on a tonic harmony altered through the addition of the lowered seventh scale degree to direct the music toward subdominant regions, a move often used to signal the imminent end of a piece. (Adding the flat-seventh is how tonal composers often tap the brakes in a coda.) Zelter had already used this chord (as well as the cadential progression in which it is embedded) in the opening piano prelude. It thus rounds off the song and, with its emphasis of the subdominant, allows a relaxed, restful “Amen” to frame the entire piece. Zelter further deploys another pre-dominant harmony, a ii^6 , on the last “balde,” reached with a descending fifth in the bass from $\hat{1}$ to $\hat{4}$. This same downward $\hat{1}-\hat{4}$ motion in the bass has already occurred three times, functioning on each occasion as a kind of reaching within. This is how Zelter rocks the cradle, always toward the restful, inward subdominant.

With his straightforward text setting and simple two-part form, Zelter matches the simple language and ethos of Goethe’s “Wandrer’s Nachtlied,” while tonally expressing the poem’s tug of distance and of rest with a subdominant bearing. Perhaps it is emblematic that Zelter simplifies the poem’s title with the single word “Ruhe.”

LOEWE

Carl Loewe’s setting of this same poem dates from 1816 or 1817. His song is in a slow $\frac{3}{2}$, marked *Sehnsüchtig klagend und getragen* (longingly lamenting and sustained). The quietly repeated chords in both hands create a sense of peace, or of slow motion; nothing un-

toward is going to happen here (ex. 2). During the course of the song, one gets used to these chords, and—like the ticking of time—they begin to fade from immediate consciousness. But when they stop at the end, on the final word of the poem, the effect is powerful.

The first melodic phrase goes from F back to F, perhaps a foreshadowing of achieved rest. But what about that $B\flat-D-C$ figure? It makes for a disjunct, unquiet circling of $\hat{5}$, a perhaps uneasy *Gipfel* in the line. The $B\flat$ is very dissonant in the immediate context: linearly it leaps a tritone from F, and vertically it rubs against both $B\flat$ and C, and also against the F in the bass. This bass note creates a blend of tonic and dominant, which can often function at this time as a marker of distance (as in the finale of Beethoven’s *Pastoral*): this is not *any* mountain top, then, but the *distant* mountain top. The closure achieved on the downbeat of m. 4 is allowed to linger, for there is much time between lines 1–2 and lines 3–5, contributing to the sense of large open spaces in Loewe’s setting.

The next melodic phrase begins dramatically, with an arpeggiated move from F up to F through D-minor harmony. Loewe leads this sonority to a V^7/V , arriving on the now tonicized dominant with the word “Hauch.” But he alters this dominant to V^7 right away, as the birds fall silent (represented in the voice by falling back to the register of the lower F, accomplished through a striking leap from D down to the leading tone E), and with the word “Walde” we touch down on the tonic once more. We do not linger on this harmony, though, for now the piano climbs up to the higher F and moves toward D minor. Its *dolcissimo* motive is a pre-echo of the voice’s “warte nur.” Here the D-minor sonority once again launches a harmonic progression by fifths, but without tonicizing the dominant. As a submediant vi chord, D minor moves to ii^7 , and with an accelerating harmonic rhythm from there to V, resolving deceptively to an entire measure of V^7/vi . This is followed by another $vi-ii^7-V$ progression, now with a regular harmonic rhythm of one chord per measure, which resolves, at last, to I. The gentle inevitability of this diatonic progression by fifths is important for the idea of moving toward rest. We are gradually settled by the

Sehnsüchtig klagend und getragen *sotto voce*

Ü - ber al - len Gip - feln ist Ruh',

in al - len Wip - feln spü - rest du kaum ei - nen Hauch; die Vö - gel - ein schwei - gen im

Wal - de. *dolciss.* War - te nur, bal - de ru - hest du

auch, bal - de, bal - de ru - hest du auch.

mf *pp* *mf* *p* *ten.*

con Ped. e sord.

The image shows a musical score for a voice and piano. It consists of four systems of music. Each system has a vocal line on a treble clef staff and a piano accompaniment on a grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The key signature is one flat (B-flat) and the time signature is 3/2. The tempo/mood is 'Sehnsüchtig klagend und getragen' and the vocal line is marked 'sotto voce'. The lyrics are in German. The piano accompaniment features a steady, chordal texture. The score includes dynamic markings such as 'mf', 'pp', 'p', and 'ten.' (tenuendo). There are also performance instructions like 'con Ped. e sord.' and 'dolciss.'.

Example 2: Carl Loewe, *Wandrer's Nachtlied*, op. 9, vol. 1.

slow gravitational force of harmonic progression, chord by chord. And this process arguably spans most of the song, for Loewe initiates three progressions by fifth from the D-minor chord. The first moves to a tonicized dominant, the next proceeds diatonically but is pulled up just short of tonic by a surprising V^7/vi , and the third finally attains tonic closure.

For his final pass through this fifths progres-

sion, Loewe repeats the last two lines of the poem, substituting "balde, balde" for "warte nur, balde." The first time through these lines, the "Ruhe" is strikingly not achieved (imagine: just as you lay your head on the pillow, about to settle into a sleep-promising tonic, you hear a brightly altered chord—so you raise your head, turn the pillow over, and then settle in for good). The repeated harmonies of the final mea-

tures also allow Loewe to bring back the B \sharp -D-C figure in the voice, thus rounding out the song with a reference to the opening phrase. But the dissonant B \sharp is softened in several ways at the end: it is no longer a tritone leap, and there is no F in the bass of the harmony.

The song ends on the third of the tonic triad, on the A, while the chords simply stop: the beating heart of the song simply stops. Time is stilled, yet that third in the voice lingers on in the mind, a dissipating wisp of subjectivity. The third can have this effect in a way that the tonic would not. Why end the first phrase on a tonic, but the last on a third? Perhaps because the tonic is like the period at the end of a sentence, while the third is more like a trailing ellipsis . . .

Ending with the third on top also implies an extension in space. This final sound works well with the spacious bearing of Loewe's entire setting, projected in the slowly iterated harmonies as well as the slowly moving rhythm of harmonic change, all of which can be heard to resonate with the implied spaces of Goethe's poem. If Zelter gently rocks the cradle in an ever lulling lullaby, Loewe seems to work on a larger scale as he begins to match the stillness of time with the fullness of space.

SCHUBERT

Franz Schubert's setting from the 1820s is easily the best known of all musical responses to Goethe's text (ex. 3). It starts with almost solemn stillness, the move to the subdominant in the first measure like a calming intake of breath. This kind of gentle neighbor motion is echoed a measure later with the word "Gipfeln." The voice rises to C, then falls back, a minor perturbation, much like the gentle rise of a mountain seen in the distance. As in the Loewe setting, the blend of dominant over a tonic pedal at this moment creates a sense of distance. Unlike the Loewe, however, Schubert creates no sense of space between lines 1-2 and lines 3-5. Instead his melody immediately arches upward to E \flat and descends into "Wipfeln," into the treetops. Like "Gipfeln," "Wipfeln" receives a dissonant harmony, even a slightly harsher one.

Then the syncopations begin, in tandem with an infusion of minor-mode tones, a chromatic

move to V in the bass, and a dominant pedal point. The hard K in "Kaum," the poem's harshest sound yet, gets Schubert's harshest melodic note yet, a D \flat . "Hauch" arrives on the dominant, as it did in both Zelter's and Loewe's settings. The ensuing pedal point on V sets the discursive line 6 (and it is interesting that Schubert doubles the word "schweigen"!). There are a number of descending seconds in the melody for this section—on "schweigen," on "schweigen" again, and on "Walde"—which makes for a kind of melodic hovering on C and B \flat that periodically touches down on the F below.

For the final section of the song, this hovering is traded for more directed melodic motion. As in the versions by Zelter and Loewe, Schubert sets the words "Warte nur" with a stepwise descent through a third. But the larger-scale motion at the half note is upward, as the same B \flat and C that hovered over the pedal point now ascend on strong beats (a move made possible by the repetition of "warte nur") to the D for "balde." Schubert sets up the word "balde" as a special moment—in the midst of all the descending figures in this song, the only distinctive local ascent is on "balde." With "balde" the song reaches its highest melodic note, F, which lingers in a fermata. The slower ascent on "warte nur, warte nur" that precedes the quicker ascent on "balde" both stages "balde" as an important arrival (the tonal goal of a cadential progression and the rhythmic and melodic goal of directed motion) and participates in a two-stage compound ascent: "warte nur, warte nur, balde" as $\hat{1}, \hat{2}, \hat{3}-\hat{4}-\hat{5}$. This is then followed by a balancing descent on "ruhest du auch" (whose $\hat{3}-\hat{2}-\hat{1}$ balances the $\hat{1}-\hat{2}-\hat{3}$ of "warte nur, balde"). But we do not descend until we have paused on "balde," on the word that means "soon." This fermata on "soon" creates a paradoxical symbol, which I like to think of as the eternal "soon."

And there's more to Schubert's "balde." Along with the registral swell in the voice to the highest note yet, horn fifths in the piano create a musical symbol of distance and space. This sense of distance merges with a sense of suspended time (the eternal "soon"). Schubert puts "balde" on its own high plateau; this is the vantage point of mortality, from which we

Langsam

Ü - ber al - len Gip - feln ist Ruh', in al - len Wip - feln spü - rest du

kaum ei - nen Hauch; die Vög - lein schwei - gen, schwei - gen im Wal - de. War - te nur, war - te nur,

bal - de ru - hest du auch, war - te nur, war - te nur, bal - de ru - hest du auch.

Example 3: Franz Schubert, *Wandrer's Nachtlied*, D. 768.

can discern the horizon. “Balde” is also like an intake of breath, a breath that can be held for a time but must be exhaled, and soon. Schubert’s “balde” sounds both the stillness of time and the fullness of space. A singer could be forgiven for lingering there.

The cadential figure that follows is also rich in implications. In addition to the $\hat{3}-\hat{2}-\hat{1}$ in the melody, which reverses the melodic progress of $\hat{1}-\hat{2}-\hat{3}$ from the first “warte nur” to the arrival of “balde,” the piano part of Schubert’s cadence includes a middle-voice chromatic descent from $\hat{5}$ to $\hat{3}$, with an ascent in the bass from $\hat{5}$ to $\hat{8}$. During this passage, the low F in the voice between $\hat{2}$ and $\hat{1}$ sounds like the vocal equivalent of a horn fifth (that low F has been a

resonant lower limit in the voice part from the second system onward). In the course of this entire phrase we hear three long beats, W-arte nur | W-arte nur | B-alde, on half notes; then three short beats: R-uh- | E-st du | A-uch, on quarter notes. This process happens twice (as we hear lines 7 and 8 twice), with the horn fifths reversing direction in the piano between the repetitions. This reversal both keeps the resonance of the horn fifths alive while sounding another $\hat{1}-\hat{2}-\hat{3}$ figure in a middle voice. The composite melody for lines 7–8 is thus: $\hat{1}, \hat{2}, \hat{3}$ ($\hat{4}-\hat{5}$); $\hat{3}-\hat{2}-\hat{1}$ ($\hat{2}-\hat{3}$). After the second pass through lines 7–8, the cadence figure is echoed yet again in the piano, at the very end, in a form that recalls the song’s opening cadence. The entire

last section of Schubert's song becomes a landscape of softly reassuring echoes.

Thus we hear how Schubert's simple tonal means resonate and gather—what could be more conventional than that cadential constellation? And yet its very conventionality is heard to express the gentle business of taking leave, of settling into rest, and in such a way as to suggest the gathering quietude of infinite time, infinite space.²

LISZT

Franz Liszt composed his setting of Goethe's poem almost thirty years after Schubert's (ex. 4).³ It begins with a simple E-major triad in close position. But by the end of the song, this simple triad will have been heard to spread itself throughout all creation. The destiny of this opening triad is emblematic of the way Liszt stages Goethe's narrative: from the most compact to the most diffuse; from the most intimate to the most universal. And while this expansiveness would seem to effect a reversal of the poem's progression from distant mountaintop to the intimate space of "du," what Liszt will leave us with at the end is a profound sense of the intimate subject having merged with those distant vistas.

The voice enters with lines 1 and 2 of the poem toward the end of a hushed harmonic progression moving through a cycle of falling thirds. This falling-third progression includes a chromatic mediant in the move from F# minor (supertonic) to D major (subtonic) and then another chromatic mediant in the move from D to B⁷. These gently enchanting harmonic moves open up an additional dimension within the key and thus create the suggestion of inward distance. It seems appropriate that the voice

enters at just the moment when the key of E reaches the D-major harmony, a harmony that can be construed as a doubly inward subdominant of the subdominant.

Both "Gipfeln" and "Wipfeln" are the result of upward leaps in the voice, and both sound on the home dominant seventh, itself made strangely bright by being reached only after the extra-dimensional D-major harmony. As in all the other settings described here, Liszt lets "Hauch" pull up to a dominant, but here it is V of vi. This move signals the possibility of a larger tonal canvas, and Liszt does not stint. He sets the discursive sixth line, "Die Vögelein schweigen im Walde," with an extraordinary recitative-like middle section, not in C# minor as suggested by that V of vi but in a very remote F minor. Then a quickening of the texture brings on a dramatic modulating passage that passes through F# minor and D minor on the way to a striking arrival on B^b $\frac{6}{4}$ for "balde" (m. 24) followed by a stirring climb in treble and bass to another arrival $\frac{6}{4}$, this time on the home dominant for "ruhest du auch" (m. 30). A further iteration of "balde ruhest du auch" peaks on a lush ninth chord, after which Liszt brings the line home to tonic with "du auch." This entire section bursts into full Lisztian commotion, including two arrival six-fours followed by an extended subsidence (the composer prolonging that home dominant for a full four measures).

When the opening falling-third progression sounds again, it could easily be taken for a postlude; but it happens twice, once on "warte nur," then in the upper register on "balde ruhest du auch, du auch." This is not the postlude: it is the thing itself, returning us to the grander cosmic rhythm of the poem after all that commotion. There is much magic in these final measures: the use of the upper register is like a sublimation into an ever more ethereal realm, and yet at the same time the bass goes down to its lowest place, thus opening up a vast registral space. To his cycle of falling thirds, Liszt adds a final connecting term, a G-major sonority, as if finding yet another dimension within.⁴

²In his forthcoming book, *Foundations of Musical Grammar* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), Lawrence Zbikowski presents analyses of each of the settings discussed so far (Zelter, Loewe, Schubert), showing how "the differences among the songs reflect not simply the way music colors or inflects Goethe's words but the active participation of sonic analogs for dynamic processes in the construction of conceptual knowledge." I thank the author for allowing me a preview of this book.

³Liszt composed the song in 1848, then revised it in 1859. The song discussed here is the later version.

⁴G as IV/IV/IV would be a triply inward subdominant in E major!

Langsam, sehr ruhig *p sotto voce*

Ü - ber al - len Gip - feln ist Ruh, in al - len Wip - feln spür - est

du kaum ei - nen Hauch, die Vö - ge - lein schwei - gen im Wal - de.

War - te nur,

war - te nur, bal - de,

una corda

pp

pp

pp

smorz.

pp

ppp

pp

semper dolciss.

ten.

ten.

ten.

rinforz.

f

Example 4: Franz Liszt, *Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh*, Berlin, 1859.

This is the song's great moment, a "letting go" of the ways and means of tonic/dominant tonality in favor of a cyclical process. The bass on G completes the cycle of thirds from E to E, allowing the song to close on an ethereal E major (now reached by a third, and through a chromatic mediant). In this way, the key of E

becomes a potentially endless cycle, with the bass traversing two octaves of its tonal space with alternating minor and major thirds. The simultaneous rising and sinking in this final passage bring to mind the image of an uncoiling spiral, loosening into infinite rest.

And what about all that "Lisztian commo-

25 *poco a poco rall.*
bal - de, bal - de ru -

29 *rit.* *poco a poco rall.*
hest du auch, bal - de ru - hest du auch, du auch,

36 *ma non troppo.* *riten.* *pp*
war - te nur, war - te nur, bal - de ru - hest du auch, du auch!

ma non troppo. *riten.* *ppp* *pppp*

Example 4 (continued)

tion" in the middle? The harmonic wandering profiles the serene outer sections, making for a kind of journey within the framing cycle, presenting something like a teeming digest of life moving between the eternal, cyclic frames. Liszt's use of B in the bass both at the beginning and at the end of his middle section makes the section seem even more parenthetical. But we live inside this parenthesis. Think of those arrival $\frac{6}{4}$ s—how like the big events in one's life, locally so imposing, but built on basses that are not grounded in any eternal harmony.


Liszt's final E-major sonority does indeed sound like an eternal harmony. This is a paradoxical effect within the world of tonal syntax, because the E major arrives not as the conventional resolution of a V7 but as a more mystical resolution that is somehow even more final. The pitch B is also important here, for it becomes Liszt's "Ruhe" pitch. It stays in place in the final measures, as the common tone shared by E's dominant (B major), E's lowered mediant (G major), and E's tonic (E major). Thus the B is the first element to find "rest," but it also

changes color as it passes from being a tonic to a third to a fifth, and it is as a low humming fifth that it fades from consciousness. The tonic would be too much of a stated resolution here, the third perhaps too subjective, but the fifth seems to hover, to fade into the world as something organic, as part of nature.

The melody in each of these settings ends on a different scale degree. Loewe ends on the third, Liszt on the fifth, and Zelter on the tonic, but over a V⁷/IV. Only Schubert ends on a tonic that is harmonized by the tonic. These different endings constitute a final telling trace of the remarkable differences that distinguish these four songs. Zelter offers a lullaby, tenderly rocking us toward the subdominant (Goethe himself praised this setting, speaking of “Über allen Gipfeln” as the poem that Zelter “so tenderly and peacefully sent forth to the world upon the wings of song”⁵). From Zelter’s peaceful lullaby we moved to Loewe’s ritual of solemn harmonies, sounding the spaciousness of time, like slow breathing. We then heard Schubert respond to the profound simplicities of Goethe’s poem with similar simplicities of tonal convention, letting telling dissonances suggest great distances, then gathering tonic and dominant, time and space, into one beautifully poised figure (“the eternal soon”). And we ended with Liszt’s grand, quasi-Wagnerian staging, in which a breathlessly waiting subject is finally granted rest as part of the cosmos, transformed from the throes of temporal subjectivity into infinite space.

All these settings, but especially those of Loewe, Schubert, and Liszt, resonate with other

Romantic artworks that profile the Night and its promise of infinity. The valorization of the night has a long lineage in Romantic thought, from the “sable goddess” in Edward Young’s *Night Thoughts* (1742–45), through Novalis’s “Gelobt sei uns die ew’ge Nacht / Gelobt der ew’ge Schlummer” (“Blessed be the endless night / Blessed the endless slumber”) from his *Hymns to the Night* (1799–1800), to Caspar David Friedrich’s numerous paintings in the early nineteenth century that feature the moon as a kind of nocturnal sun. But none of these and nothing else is as compact, as miraculously self-contained and self-sufficient, as Goethe’s little poem. What an opportunity this monad of a poem provides for our composers, allowing each to set afresh the temporal and spatial coordinates of human mortality.

With Zelter’s gently rocking triplets, with Loewe’s slow procession of harmonies, with Schubert’s echoing blends of tonic and dominant, and with Liszt’s release of a closely spaced mid-range triad into the full registral space of the piano, we hear an astonishingly diverse series of variations on mortality, on the gathering of twilight, the gathering stillness of time, the gathering fullness of space. 

Abstract.

Carl Zelter, Carl Loewe, Franz Schubert, and Franz Liszt all composed settings of Goethe’s famous *Nachtlied* “Über allen Gipfeln.” Gathering multiple layers of rhyme and rhythm, Goethe’s poem achieves a rare cogency that invests every syllable with musical significance. Each of the composed settings reflects this process of gathering in different ways, from Zelter’s lulling rhythms and Loewe’s processional harmonies to Schubert’s landscape of echoes and Liszt’s drama of cosmic assimilation. Thus this monad of a poem allows each composer to set afresh the temporal and spatial coordinates of human mortality. Keywords: Goethe, Zelter, Loewe, Schubert, Liszt, time, space, mortality

⁵In a letter dated 4 September 1831, trans. Lorraine Byrne Bodley, in *Goethe and Zelter: Musical Dialogues* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 522.