One of the first pieces of classical music that I got to know, long before I knew I would be a composer, was Schubert’s *Der Leiermann* (*The Organ Grinder*) from *Winterreise*, sung in German by Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau. I was 17 at the time, and, never having studied German, I had no clue what it meant, but I thought it was one of the saddest and most beautiful things I’d ever heard. When I laboured my way through a word-for-word translation of *Winterreise* later on (I was a singer-loving collaborative pianist, and played for whomever I could), I thought of *The Winter Journey* as a metaphor for death.

Even though Schubert was just 30 when he wrote it - an age that seems younger and younger to me – he knew that he was dying. This duality of youth and old age gives the music a mercurial, constantly-changing energy.

Right from the start of the journey, we meet a protagonist who is surprisingly mature despite his youth. The resolute, but relatively muted music of his leave-taking (I – *Gute Nacht* – *Farewell*) is heavy, but not heart-breaking - at the start of his journey, he has the presence of mind to leave alone at night, rather than ruin the memories of his love. *Farewell* briefly shifts into the major mode, continuing to be whisperingly quiet, as the protagonist sings “I’d rather leave in silence And vanish in the night, Than do my love the violence of turning into spite.” The wanderer’s fundamentally thoughtful, solitary nature is clearly articulated here, although at the beginning of the journey he can’t see how long and difficult his path might be, and the stray dogs are already beginning to follow him.

Wandering alone in the cold, haunted by his memories, the protagonist begins to be worn down: in the sixth song, *Wasserfluth* (*Flood*), which finds him crying alone in the cold and trying to imagine the return of spring breaking the ice, the music is rhythmically irregular. Right from the piano introduction, the odd contrasts of groups of three and four unsettle the listener. The protagonist is constantly sorrowful, and in describing his pain the music is stretched to an almost ugly cry. The anguished, dissonant melody of “Snow will feed the river’s spate” shows him in extreme pain, which is then briefly relieved by tears, but his pain soon returns. These frequent mood-changes in the music are hyper-realistic; they telescope the varying moods of grief into a moment in time, distilling the essence of loss.

As time passes, the wanderer becomes yet more circumspect. In XIV - *Die Greise Kopf* (*The Hoary Head*), he imagines himself elderly upon seeing the frost in his hair; when the sun warms him, he is distressed to note that he’s still young. “...The sun has strengthened me, My hair is dark as ever. I shudder at the youth I see, As far from death as ever.” Schubert’s music here is stark. The piano line is reduced to bare octaves, all colour and harmony is stolen from the song, leaving a bleak mood as the protagonist stares ahead at all the unwanted years ahead of him.
Nearer to the end of the cycle, in XXI – Das Wirthshaus (The Inn), the protagonist finds himself lingering by a peaceful graveyard and wishing that he could rest there with the other “tired travellers” who are offered “a peaceful place to sleep.” Schubert’s music captures the beauty and restfulness of the graveyard, and the longing of someone who is sick of life before it is over. The rather horrific ending of The Inn is unexpected – the last minute of the song is a rueful, sickened lament at his need to continue wandering: “So on I go, forever, the corpse who will not die.” The music very briefly turns bitter. It isn’t strongly dramatic, but again it is bleak despite returning almost immediately to the major mode. (Schumann fans might recall the tone of Ich grolle nicht here, in miniature.)

Is this youth, or (premature) old age? The cycle had seemed to me in the past to be leading towards a conclusion where, finally, the protagonist can stop forcing himself onwards and sink into the prolonged rest of oblivion. But in revisiting Winterreise this year, I find that my take on it is different – despite the cold, the emphasis on colourlessness, predatory birds and dogs, the solitary life of the protagonist, and frequent dreams of death and oblivion, the resolution of the story doesn’t offer the peace or finality of death. The Winter Journey - and in particular its final song Der Leiermann (The Organ Grinder) - is telling us Müller’s and Schubert’s archetypal story of what it means to them to be an artist. Considering that I am a composer myself, I guess it shouldn’t be surprising that I see the conclusion of this journey as an acceptance not of death, but of their roles as artists in society.

During the journey, there are many instances in which the protagonist observes the natural world around him – the linden tree, the frozen river, potentially predatory dogs and crows; and the society from which he has been excluded - sleeping people who are blissfully unaware of his lonesome fate, his former lover and her family. Despite his frequent musing about death, his sadness and his undesired solitude, he isn’t desperate or suicidal; one of the difficulties of his life is that he is young, and has many years ahead of him. These years at times feel like a burden, because escaping them, either by suicide or natural causes, isn’t an option. There is, in fact, no mention of death as a possible resolution in The Organ Grinder; instead, the protagonist observes the organ-grinder - the first human he meets on his journey, someone appears to be his older alter ego - with curiosity. He watches him, cold, alone and barefoot; the organ-grinder is something of a social outcast, but a deeply determined, persistent one. No matter what happens, if he is hungry, if dogs menace him, if he is completely ignored, he will play his music. At the end of the song, our protagonist throws his lot in with him: “Strange and speechless beggar, shall I tag along? Will you play your music, if I sing my song?” Schubert’s music here is simple and open. The vocal line rises in question as the protagonist asks to be his ally. The entire song is marked “p” or “pp” (quiet or very quiet) until the single bar of piano music following this question. For one brief moment, the organ grinder’s music is loud and prominent – it embodies strength and continuity despite the miserable cold – and after this, a final, hushed piano melody and the story ends in an extremely introverted but peaceful mood. Schubert’s and Müller’s protagonist doesn’t have an easy fate, but he does have a compelling and a meaningful one. Personally, I would take an eccentric and somewhat unstable life in which I get to make art every day, over any alternative,
If you are as entranced by the Winter Journey as I am, there are two quite modern art works that might also interest you: the first being the Silent Songs of Valentin Silvestrov, a great modern (but not modernist) song cycle, written in Russian in the most improbable time for such a thing in musical history – 1974, when modernism was at its full fruition. The hushed introversion, introspection, and at times peaceful character of this music make it a 20th-century counterpart to Winterreise, and the lyricism of the melodies will attract any Schubert-lover. Recordings of several of the songs are extant on YouTube, notably La belle dame sans merci. http://youtu.be/jJmkC0BTw6I

David Rakoff’s posthumously-published final book, LOVE, DISHONOR, MARRY, DIE, CHERISH, PERISH is a very recent and equally improbable work of literature – written in rhyming verse, it tells the intertwining stories of several funny, tragic, and beautiful men and women. The characters are remarkably drawn – eccentric, humourous, intelligent people, whose fascinating and quirky lives are deeply touching. I had no idea I’d like it so much. As with the Winter Journey, I was surprised by the power of the rhyming text. If you’re curious, you can find an excerpt at: http://www.salon.com/2013/07/16/david_rakoffs_love_dishonor_marry_die_cherish_perish/


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