

ERLKÖNIG

Poem by GOETHE

Music by FRANZ SCHUBERT
Op. 1

so often, after hearing a performance of this song, the only impression left in the mind of the listener is of its relentless speed. Energetic galloping, however, is not the be-all and end-all of the song. Of course it does fly forward inexorably and the two performers strain every nerve, give their last ounce of strength to maintain this urge. Spend their energy, drive themselves forward as they may, the performers should always bear in mind that, above all considerations of speed, it is the drama of the story that matters. Most of this drama is in the singer's part, and the accompanist should always bear this in mind in spite of the fact that the galloping horse, which first catches the eye in this picture and clatters throughout the song, is drawn in the terrific accompaniment.

It is the singer who makes the wind whistle through our hair. He makes us share the terror of the dying boy, the anguish of the father; it is he who lets us hear the spectral Erlking's grim overtures grow from a sinister smile to a scowl, from a whisper to a snarl.

Each of these widely distinct characters must be delineated according to his own nature, invested with his individuality. There is a world of difference between all three. When he is the boy, the singer should be petrified with fear down to the very marrow of his bones; when he is the father he is at once the comforting protector of his child and a prey to the most tormenting anxiety; when he is the Erlking he is Death, implacable, ghastly.

To people the stage with this assorted caste the singer shares their emotions and conveys these emotions to us, and the picture becomes alive. But we are not gripped nor is our pulse quickened if the singer thinks he can carry us away by merely wearing a different facial expression for each character. Schubert, however, comes to our aid, and it is very necessary for the singer to be intelligently aware of his masterly design. He sets the vocal line of the father on a different level to that of the boy. See, in the following example, how the *tessitura* of the child's voice lies compared to the man's.

Ex. 1

PP FATHER *cresc.*
Mein Sohn, 37 was birgst 38 du so bang 39 dein Ge-sicht? 40

PP CHILD
41 Siehst, Va- 42 ter, du 43 den Erl-kö-nig 44 nicht? 45



This difference between these two voices is always quite distinct. True, the vocal line 37 to 40 is an ascending one, but it is naturally so, for a troubled question is being posed, 'My son, why do you cover your face in fear?' At 51 to 54, low again in the voice, the father attempts to comfort the boy and make light of his fears: we can tell it by the *tessitura* as well as by the words. A still further distinction between these voices is to be seen in Schubert's instructions. Nearly always the father speaks in a normal tone of voice—often it is marked *piano* (note for instance the *diminuendo* at 80, Example 2) to prevent his increasing agitation from alarming the boy further. The latter loses control of himself certainly—but the father never, he dare not. True the vocal line of the father gets higher and higher as his worry increases—we can see it by comparing Examples 1, 2, and 3—but it is always far below the level of the boy's in pitch and in fever.

EX. 2

CHILD

Mein Va-ter, mein Va-ter, und hö-rest du nicht, was

73 74 75 76

dim. FATHER

Er-len-kö-nig mir lei-se ver-spricht? Sei ru-hig blei-be

77 78 79 80 81

ru-hig, mein Kind: in dür-ren Blätt-ern säu-selt der Wind.

82 83 84 85

The further the song progresses the more shrill, the more frenzied the child becomes,

EX. 3

CHILD

Mein Va-ter, mein Va-ter, und siehst du nicht dort, Erl-

98 99 100 101

dim. FATHER

-kö-nigs Töch-ter am dü- stern Ort? Mein Sohn, mein

102 103 104 105 106

Gresc.

Sohn, ich seh es ge-nau, es schei-nen die al-ten Wei-den so grau.

107 108 109 110 111 112

until at last demented, he screams

Ex. 4 *child*

Mein Va - ter, mein Va - ter, jetzt - fasst er mich an!
 Erl - kö - nig hat mir ein Leids ge - tan!

We can see by the quavers in 74, 99, 125 the trembling child cowering closer to his father's breast.

To sum up, then, as far as we have gone: each wail of the child 'mein Vater, mein Vater' is louder and shriller than the last. Schubert has made it possible to achieve this vocal effect by stepping up the line at each succeeding entry of the boy; he has made it possible to get into the character of the father by keeping that vocal line low in pitch and quantity. I do not think that Schubert is asking too much of the singer.

One character is sung with restraint, with deep manly timbre of voice, and a facial expression of lively but controlled anxiety.

The other character is sung without restraint other than that which tells the singer that he must have vocal force in hand for the huge build-up to the climax.

The dreaded Erlking I have left until last because I feel that Schubert has depicted him so marvellously that he presents less difficulty so far as vocal characterization is concerned, than the other characters. The singer's voice for the Erlking must be disembodied, it never rises above a *pianissimo* level; only the child hears him. He sings with a leer, a malignant smile. Were it not for this smile the part could be sung with almost clenched teeth. The tempter paints a picture of pretty games and flowers, of nightly revels with his daughters, a picture he tries to make alluring but which, because of this ghastly smile, repels the boy. Almost a nasal tone is required for his three utterances, a reedy tone which the singer can get by taking full advantage of the numerous thin vowel sounds met so frequently when the Erlking sings; I put them in the following example in italics.

Ex. 5 *pp* ERLKÖNIG

Du lie - bes Kind, komm, geh mit mir' gar
 schö - ne Spiel - spiel ich mit dir, etc.

These thin vowel sounds are employed again and again by the Erlking, in his second invitation

'Willst, feiner Knabe, du mit mir gehn?
Meine Töchter sollen dich warten schön;
Meine Töchter führen den nächtlichen Reihn
Und wiegen und tanzen und singen dich ein.'

I can count at least sixteen vowels that can be made thin and mean; if the singer can find more so much the better. Listening to Fischer-Dieskau or Hans Hotter singing this section, one is convinced that this was Goethe's intention, for these artists give the Erlking's speeches softly but thrill the listener by the pointedness of their enunciation. Schubert marks this section *ppp*.

Only once the Erlking emerges from his *sotto voce*; this occurs on his last word to the boy 'und bist du nicht willig, so brauch ich Gewalt'. (And if you're unwilling I'll seize you by force.) 'Gewalt' stands out suddenly in sharp relief, like a snarl: Schubert marks this word *fff* as the cruel icy hand clutches its victim.

I have accounted for six of the eight verses of the poem, that is to say verses 2 to 7 inclusive. The first and last verses are narrative. Verse 1 describes the scene—the rider galloping through the night with his dying child clasped to his breast: the last verse tells of the father's shudder, of the spurring of his horse to greater speed, and the arrival home to find the child dead in his arms. The horse is pulled up to a standstill (I do not think a *rallentando* in 145, before coming to a halt in the following bar, is out of order even though Schubert does not mark it, for the sweating steaming animal could not be brought from a furious gallop to a full stop in one stride) and with a passage in recitative style the song finishes.

Ex. 6

Not; in sei-nen Armen das Kind. war tot.

Andante

145 146 147 148

The pianist gets his diminished seventh chord in 147 out of the way before the singer says 'war tot' (was dead). This must be sung *piano* as the composer marks; it is more impressive than a *forte* after the screaming and tumult that preceded it. Strict observance of the *fermata* rest is necessary, and a slight but significant break before the final word 'tot'.

Now for the accompaniment.

Many an honest pianist finding this accompaniment impossible to play is in good company, for Schubert himself jumped up from the piano in a rage exclaiming, "The triplets are too difficult for me"; but I submit with all respect that it was much easier to play them on the instrument of Schubert's day with its light butterfly touch than it is on a modern concert grand pianoforte.

Some singers take no heed of the *tempo* established in the introduction and run away at virtually an impossible speed. What is the just *tempo*? Schubert marked it 'Schnell' (quick) and that is clear enough, but the rhythm of the repeated octaves and chords represents the rapid *staccato* of thudding hooves. Imagine for a moment the triplet rhythm of a galloping horse; you will find if you are really fair that it is possible to mutter 'cloppitty, cloppitty, cloppitty' ever so much faster than a horse could possibly gallop.



Singers should bear this in mind as it is their responsibility, for certainly no pianist is going to establish a *tempo* that is ridiculously and unreasonably fast. And besides, at 135, when his right hand is already at collapsing point, the accompanist is asked to go even faster. No, I think the clue to the true *tempo* is to be found in the left-hand motif.

Ex. 7



Of course the song is fast; there is no gainsaying that, but this figure must intimidate us and it cannot do that if it is scrambled. It is robbed of its meaning if taken too rapidly.

I alluded above to the 'honest' accompanist. It is practically certain that he will be unable to play the repeated right-hand octaves and chords as they are written: therefore he must be dishonest, and take care not to advertise his delinquency. For instance, when the left hand is doing nothing it is unreasonable to make the right hand do all the work and expect it to be able to maintain its speed and strength for very long.

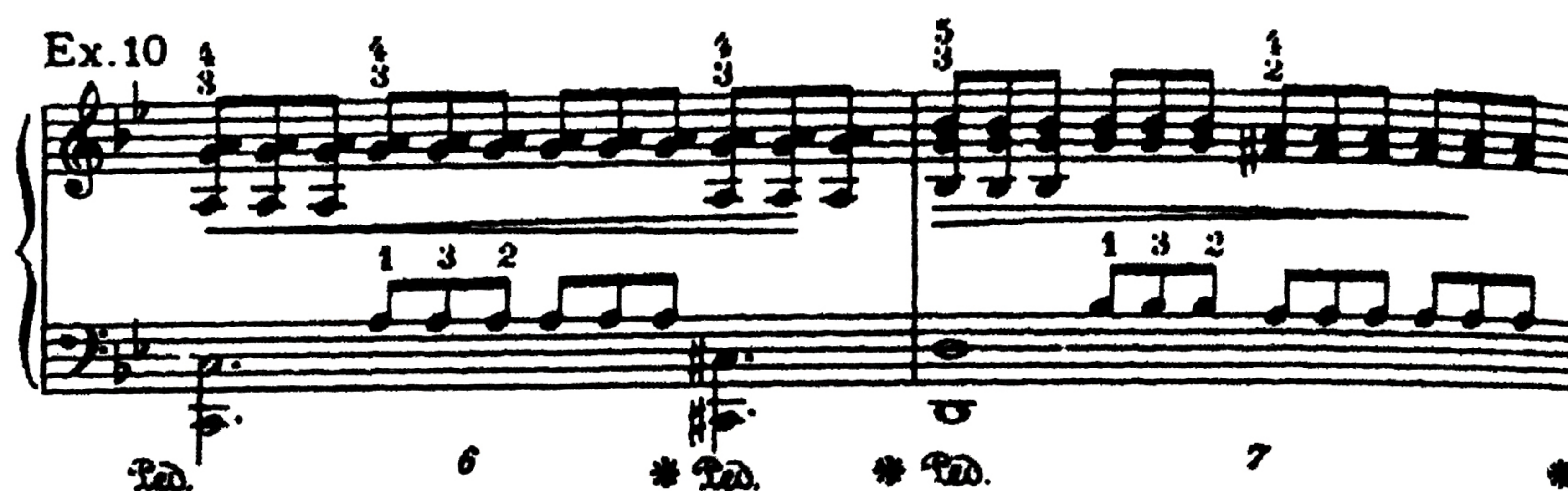
Ex. 8



Obviously the left hand can help by taking the lower note. Here are bars 1 to 3 enough to give the reader the idea. I do not improve on Schubert by altering his notes, I only rearrange them, showing my fingering.



So far so good, but 6 and 7 become complicated by an added note in the right hand which we cope with as follows:



Again at 15, 16, &c., the left hand helps and comes over above the right hand, and springs out of the way.



I think the above examples suffice to show the pianist how he can save his right hand whenever there is a rest or a pedal note in the bass clef.

In spite of all his manœuvring, however, the most willing horse will be hard put to it at the child's final outburst at 123. Here it may be necessary to resort to subterfuge:



But if he performs this makeshift arrangement boldly by playing his left-hand quavers forcibly, it may escape detection; that, as I said earlier, is the principal consideration. What a respite for the right hand is provided by those quaver rests!

Such means as I have suggested for negotiating these problems of technique and endurance are surely forgivable in view of what comes at 131 and for which I can offer no relief.

Ex. 13



There are fifteen bars of this; it is killing and too much for the strength of any man. A generous use of the sustaining pedal will help.

Two periods of rest for the accompanist are bars 58 to 71 and bars 87 to 96. I give the first two bars of each of these sections. They occur when the Erlking is whispering to the boy.

Ex. 14



Ex. 15



In Examples 14 and 15, the latter especially, the pianist rests his hand by allowing it to go limp and relaxed. He will feel refreshed when he has to renew his vigorous clatter later. Neither of these sections are at all fatiguing to play, for the pianoforte tone needs only to correspond with the singer's whisper.

I once had the pleasure (the doubtful pleasure) of hearing a virtuoso pianist play the Erlking. It was, from the technical standpoint, an astounding and unbelievably brilliant performance. It had but one

impediment; the singer—young, strong, hard working though he was—was unable to make himself heard above the general din that his famous partner was creating. It is worthy of the pianist's notice that out of the song's 148 bars, 69 of them are *piano* or *pianissimo*.

This great song is the severest test imaginable for the two performers. All I have attempted is to indicate how a singer can bring the picture with all its drama to life. The accompanist who is forced to dodge some of the technical difficulties in the manner I have sketched can remain unashamed so long as his conscience tells him he is endeavouring to do his best by Schubert. I can only hope the reader of goodwill assumes it is unnecessary for me to adopt these measures.

Although 'Erlkönig' is a man's song, I have heard wonderful performances by two great women artists, Elena Gerhardt and Kathleen Ferrier.

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