

Femme fatale: Gender, Deception, & die Lorelei in Schumann's Liederkreis, op. 39

*Ich weiss nicht, was soll es bedeuten,
Daß ich so traurig bin;
Ein Märchen aus alten Zeiten
Das kommt mir nicht aus dem Sinn. . .*

The siren, that immortal water nymph who lures sailors to their doom with an inexorable and mysterious song, is a mythological archetype that spans boundaries of language, culture, geography, and time. The term “siren” originates from Greek mythology, but most cultures recount legends regarding water spirits, usually female, at best mischievous, but often malicious. Sirens are described by the earliest Greek accounts as large birds with the heads or upper torsos of women. As these myths were told and retold, these bird-women, whose haunting song would drive a mortal man to insanity, began to develop a second irresistible trait; they shed their wings and feathers and became beautiful women, as mesmerizing to the eye as the ear. Through this transformation, the sirens became more than simply symbols of temptation; they were now sexual beings, seductive and irresistible, promising otherworldly pleasures but rewarding only death. The association of these demigods with danger and seduction, nature and sexuality, the sensual and the ethereal, in combination with the tales of their enchanting and prophetic song, made them an extremely popular subject for the poets, playwrights, and composers of the nineteenth century.

It is no wonder, therefore, that at the turn of the nineteenth century, the thriving literary community of Germany crafted a version of the siren myth for themselves. The story of the Rhine maiden Lorelei, which has now reached near-ubiquitous status in the contemporary cultural milieu, was created a mere two centuries ago by a Romantic poet as the main character of a long ballad included in his novel. In the ballad, a beautiful fisherman’s daughter, betrayed by her love, leaps to her death in the Rhine only to be transformed into a sorceress whose mesmerizing voice and body mean certain death for all who heard or looked upon her.

Numerous settings of the ballad followed, and many poets tried their hand at crafting new versions of Lorelei’s story. The version of the story that will be the focus of the remainder of this essay

was composed by Robert Schumann in 1840, based on a text by Josef von Eichendorff. Eichendorff, along with Heinrich Heine, was the source of the texts that became the basis for many of the *lieder* composed in the nineteenth century. His writing, which included both verse and prose, appealed to many of the German Romantic composers because of its distinctive combination of quick wit and fiery passion.

Schumann's setting of the retold Lorelei legend, entitled "Waldesgespräch" (Conversation in the Wood), contains many of the familiar tropes of the Lorelei myth; however, Schumann often steps outside tradition to compose out issues of ambiguity, gender, and deception frequently present in Eichendorff's text. In this version, an unidentified man, presumably a hunter (though some sources refer to him as a knight), encounters a beautiful woman traveling alone late at night in a wood. He attempts to woo her with gallantry, but she responds only with scorn for men, explaining that the hunter she loved has betrayed her. She warns him to run away, that he does not know who she is. He responds with more gallant flattery, but is stopped mid-stanza by a revelation: the woman to whom he has been speaking is none other than the witch Lorelei. She responds to his sudden fear with cold disdain, mocking his previous gallantry. The poem ends with her ominous proclamation: "Kommst nimmermehr aus diesem Wald." (You will never again leave this wood).

However, much like Eichendorff's other poems, "Waldesgespräch" is filled with ambiguity and innuendo. The hunter's "gallant" language could possibly be interpreted as menacing sexual aggression, thereby complicating the typical attitude towards the sorceress. Additionally, Lorelei does not directly explain why her heart is broken. She says, "Wohl irrt das Waldhorn her und hin," which literally translates to "The forest horn strays here and there." The German word "Waldhorn" is more accurately translated to mean "hunting horn," which functions as a metonymy, referring to a hunter. However, some ambiguity remains. The statement "The hunter strays here and there" could be taken to explain Lorelei's broken heart, which is in line with the traditional Lorelei narrative. There is another interpretation, though: "the hunter" could refer to the man, in which case her statement,

which initially reads as one eliciting sympathy, is in fact a subtly mocking and ominous hint at his impending doom.

One important textual difference between Eichendorff's "Waldesgespräch" and the more traditional version of the story found, for example, in Heine's "Die Lorelei," is narrative situation. Heine's poem is univocal: the story of Lorelei is conveyed through an omniscient narrator, in the style of a fairy or folk tale. Eichendorff's poem here again is more complicated. Rather than use the single voice of an omniscient narrator, he splits the four stanzas of the poem between the two voices of the hunter and Lorelei, removing a level of mediation and allowing the reader to witness the events firsthand. However, this introduces another level of ambiguity; without an omniscient narrator to reveal the inner motivations and thoughts of the characters, the reader is left to her own conclusions about what is not explicitly said or done.

Part of the compositional challenge of setting this poem, therefore, is in clarifying (or not clarifying) the textual ambiguities. Schumann introduces a sort of omniscient narrator in the form of the accompanying piano. As a pianist as well as a composer, his settings of texts always fully include the piano as a second (or, in the case of "Waldesgespräch", a third) voice. In the song, the piano creates an aural setting, comments on the events going on in the text, and helps characterize the two voices. In this song, and on a much larger scale in *Liederkreis* as a whole, the piano creates continuity through the playing, repeating, and manipulating of motives. While ambiguities still exist, such as the initial intents of the two characters (perversion or chivalry? poetic justice or malice?), the piano accompaniment dramatically enriches the dramatic narrative of the piece.

By tracing the narrative arc through the course of the song, the development of gendered motivic characterization (and the eventual blurring of these gender roles) can be most easily explored. Both the hunter and Lorelei are constructed through a careful combination of musical tropes. The listener is introduced to the first trope at the beginning of the work; the initial accompaniment pattern establishes the identity, and masculine gender, of the first speaker before the first word is sung.



fig. 1: hunt motif (mm. 1-2)

The horn fifth pattern in the right hand, as well as the I - V - I repeated left hand bass pattern are both idiomatic hunting motives. Once the speaker's identity is defined, the piano accompaniment changes to what I will henceforth refer to as the "seduction motif"; the hunter's harmonic language changes from the simple, strong V - I progression to a more ornate, chromatic melody and accompanying pattern, with a distinctive rhythm and thicker texture that will return again later in the piece.

fig. 2: "seduction" motif (mm. 11-12)

It must be noted, however, that what initially appears to be a showy harmonic pattern is simply a series of resolving secondary dominant chords (again, a V - I hunt motif, but much subtler this time).

The deceptive cadence at the end of the hunter's first stanza is a startling change from the strong, decided harmonic progression that preceded it. The hunter has quite clearly been taken aback by Lorelei. His cadence is on track until precisely the moment when the accompaniment changes to the first one of Lorelei's accompanying patterns, the distinctly feminine "harp" motif:

fig. 3: "harp" motif (mm. 15-16)

This deceptive cadence also points out the dramatic irony in the circumstance; the piano-narrator is commenting on Lorelei's deception of the hunter.

As explored extensively in Annegret Fauser’s essay “Rheinsirenen: Loreley and Other Rhine Maidens,” the harp motif is actually an distinctive trope of musical settings of the Lorelei legend. Nearly every setting of the tale, regardless of the author of the text, represents Lorelei with a harp accompaniment. Even later versions of the story, such as that which occurs in Wagner’s *Das Rheingold*, are accompanied by some sort of arpeggiated harp motif. Additionally, this harp motif hovers above a pedal C, which Fauser compares to a “mermaid floating in the water”. An additional musical trope of Lorelei settings, elements of which are at least evident in the song, is the barcarole. In part simply due to the style of one of the earliest, and most popular, settings of Heine’s “Die Lorelei”, most settings of the tale use the 6/8 rhythm of the traditional Venetian songs as another trope in combination with the arpeggiated harp accompaniment pattern.

After a cadence (still in C major), Lorelei’s accompaniment pattern changes to a variation on the “seduction” motif. However, where the hunter’s version of the motif was only superficially harmonically complex, this version is truly complex, with many linear chromatic chords and unstable key areas. The rhythm and the textural density of the pattern remain nearly the same; Lorelei is out-seducing the hunter and mocking him at the same time. Here in the song the gender roles begin to blur; Lorelei begins to, in her deception of the hunter, take a more dominant, masculine role. To add to the complexity, both harmonic and emotional, the “seduction” motif in the left hand is actually paired with a descending lament bass pattern, as if to ominously hint at the fate of the hunter even while seducing him.



fig. 4: “seduction” motive with lament bass (mm. 25-29)

Lorelei’s half cadence in E major, which transitions immediately into the hunt motif, establishes that she is firmly in control, and the replacement of the consonant dominant chord in the

accompanying hunt motif with the more unstable dominant seventh chord, paired with the unstable suspensions in the hunter's vocal line, give away her effect on him. His accompaniment portrays him as visibly shaken, in spite of his confident words. When he realizes the identity of the woman, all semblance of stability disappears and his accompanying harmonic progression is thrown off. However, the bass still moves in fourths; losing his composition (and shortly, his life) does not cause him to lose his identity.

The image shows a musical score for a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line is written in a single staff with lyrics: "jetzt kenn' ich dich, Gott steh' mir bei, du". The piano accompaniment consists of two staves. The tempo is marked "Im Tempo." and the dynamics are marked with "f" (forte). The key signature has one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 4/4. The bass line in the piano part moves in fourths, as mentioned in the text.

fig. 5: revelation, bass moves by P4 (mm. 41-42)

By this point in the piece, both characters have been firmly established, and so further step-by-step evaluation of characterization would be redundant. However, in this last stanza, Lorelei's morbid sense of humor comes out in its fullest. What had been hinted at by the lament bass-seduction pairing is fully realized. At the conclusion of the last harp motif (and consequently, at the melodic climax of the piece), the seduction motif in the right hand is paired with a lament bass, all while Lorelei sings the hunter's words back at him.

The image shows a musical score for a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line is written in a single staff with lyrics: "es ist schon spät, es ist schon kalt". The piano accompaniment consists of two staves. The key signature has one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 4/4. The piano part features a complex harmonic structure with many chords and a melodic line in the right hand.

fig. 6: seduction + lament + hunter's words (mm. 54-58)

As illustrated extensively above, the piano plays a large role in constructing the characters of the two voices. The accompaniment allows one person to become two personalities, with different motivations, different intelligences, and especially different genders. The piano, from the first note

until the last, is extremely involved in gendering the two voices. The nature of the Lorelei legend (and of the culture of the 19th century) calls for this dramatic differentiation. The basic story alone is dramatically gendered: a strong male figure is metaphorically and literally emasculated by the supernatural feminine guile of a vengeful sorceress. Just under the surface of the narrative is a paradox of Romantic male sexuality: the fear of emasculation through a completely inescapable form of seduction coupled with the desire to surrender oneself completely to passion, whatever the cost. This idea of a Romantic male sexual paradox is only magnified by this particular setting of the tale; this Lorelei is not only a powerful, immortal, and undeniable force, but she also has a dark sense of humor. She is not afraid of toying with her victims. While some might interpret the lament bass pairing with the “seduction” theme in Lorelei’s accompaniment as a sign of self-doubt or hesitation, the repetition of that accompaniment pattern at the climax of the work, complete with the first words the hunter spoke to Lorelei, now being used against him, can only be interpreted as deliberate, malicious, and wickedly funny.

While this song portrays a shockingly dominant and strong female character for the time when it was written, it cannot be read as a feminist composition. First, there is the previously-discussed Romantic male fantasy-paradox that is represented in the fantasy character of Lorelei. This subversive desire to allow a woman to dominate, this desire to be dominated, was channelled into a fictional composition rather than into any sort of real-world situation. This is admittedly a rather large assumption, as I have no information on the sex life of the Schumanns. However, in the journals and letters of Clara Schumann, I have seen no indication of the sort of large scale social (and sexual) deviance that would be representative of any sort of progressive feminist actions on the part of Robert Schumann. Clara is perpetually self-conscious of her ability as a composer in her correspondence and journals, not simply because of self-esteem issues, but because of a gendered concept of talent. While Robert Schumann did give his wife the freedom to continue giving piano concerts after their marriage, which was unusual for the time, this was most likely for reasons other than women’s liberation; Schumann lost his ability to play piano due to a hand injury a few years before marrying

her, and she quickly became his pianist-of-choice for new compositions. However, listeners looking to the German Romantic *lied* tradition for strong women needn't lose all hope. Clara Schumann and Amy Beach produced impressive bodies of work, and though much of Clara's music went unpublished during her lifetime, it has been receiving a great deal of critical and academic attention for the last decade or so, especially in comparison with Robert Schumann and others. While Clara never had confidence in her work, its placement more and more often alongside her husband's is definitely a heartening trend.

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