

ZWEI STUFEN AUS DEM GLEICHEN GRUNDSTÜCK

[STUDENT NAME REDACTED]

ADVANCED MUSIC THEORY II
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Although written within thirteen years of each other, the settings of the poem “Mondnacht” composed by Robert Schumann and Johannes Brahms yield two distinctive interpretations. It is difficult to say which depicts the text more accurately, because each unique musical narrative highlights different possible meanings of the passage.

The text comes from the poem “Mondnacht” by Joseph von Eichendorff. The poem is in ABAB form and consists of three stanzas. The first stanza describes the beauty of a moonlit night so serene, it looked as if kissed by the heavens—an earth dusted in the illuminating beams of the moon. This scene of shimmering blossoms moves the subject, “she,” to dream of “him.” This woman seems to be dreaming of a lover who has either left her or has passed away before her. The second stanza describes the wind as it passes through the fields of grain and makes its way through the rustling leaves of the forest. The second stanza also comments on the clarity of the stars that night. Although section could be referring to a literal breeze drifting through the night, the text implies that the wind is moving upward from the fields on the ground, to the leaves high in the trees, and finally all the way to the stars shining clearly in the night sky.

The title alone, which means “Moonlit Night,” gives insight as to the meaning of the poem. The themes of moonlight and nighttime signify the close of day. This end of day theme is also indicative of the end of life. However, instead of painting a scene that resembles death, he creates a picture that is very much alive; the breeze catches its fingers on the heads of wheat, and the trees shiver with whispers as the wind moves softly through its branches. Instead of depicting death in a perilous,

fearsome manner, Eichendorff portrays the night in such a beautiful and serene manner that this foreshadowing of death does not taint. The third stanza confirms this sweet view of death. It describes the flight of the soul over the “the silent regions” of the land. A winged soul gracefully flying home on the breath of a “starry-clear” night does not sound like the violence and fear usually associated with death. The departure is sweet because death will reunite her with her lover. Her soul not only flies upward, but also soars “as if it were flying home.” This indicates a return to a place of belonging that was previously only reachable by dreams.

Schumann’s introduction to the piece truly captures the “shimmer” of the night and the ethereal bath of moonlight with his chromatic passing tones. Schumann also utilizes repeated intervals of a second in the right hand with very little accompaniment in the bass. These dissonances, which are so isolated and exposed, quite literally create a sense of suspension. By creating this sense of unresolved floating, Schumann grabs the attention of the listener and holds it until he resolves. He gradually adds thickness to the chords as each line progresses. This gradual build alludes to some impending event. Schumann utilizes this opening theme in between each stanza of the poem. This theme serves as a beautiful segue, but it is also the piano’s solo in the piece. The rest of the piece, the piano is clearly setting the stage for the singer to playact the story, but this theme resembles the shimmer, which is on the blossoms. Interesting to note is that he repeats this shimmering piano theme down the octave each time it appears. This descent always leads straight to the dominant in the home key and sets up for returning to the verses. Schumann beautifully paints the text “es rauschten leis’ die Wälder,” by once

again, using the dissonance of the second, but also the octave third in the right hand. A sudden jump in the bass from a B2 to E4 between measures 35 and 36 sends the sound immediately upward along with the imagination of the listener. This sudden jump to a higher register is a masterful depiction of the contrasting low fields on the ground and the high tips of the rustling forest trees. He builds from this verse by thickening the chords by increasing the surface rhythm in the bass. This increases tension until the modulation at the word “spannte.” The purposeful placement of this word in the modulation truly exemplifies the “spannte” or the “spreading” of the wings of the soul. As the music swells and the modulation makes its way down a chromatic descent to key of F-sharp major, the wings of the soul unfold and expand.

Overall, Schumann is very repetitive in his accompaniment of this piece. With the exception of the piano theme he inserts between verses, his harmonic rhythm remains repeated sixteenth notes across an entire bar with very little to no movement in the bass, and ergo, very little harmonic change with a bar. These carefully chosen chords set the mood and the tone of this moonlit night and create an atmosphere of ethereal rest, without conflicting with or covering the singer. Schumann leaves the spaces in the accompaniment relatively clear and open for dramatic interpretation by the singer, but beautifully sets the stage for the story the singer tells.

Brahms begins his interpretation of the text with a three-bar theme seen repeatedly, especially in the voice part, throughout the song. Unlike Schumann, Brahms uses arpeggiated chords to create his moonlight scene. These chords are generally diatonic with very few dissonances. This simplistic and generally diatonic

accompaniment suggests a lighter tone than the more complex, chromatic-heavy Schumann beginning phrase. This major chord arpeggiation suggests very lively, exhilarating plot—a beautiful narrative of a beautiful scene. During the second phrase, however, in measure 20, the sweet story takes a foreboding turn as the piece moves into A-flat minor. This ominously entrance of the parallel minor alludes to an eminent downturn. In the Brahms setting, the phrase, “nach Haus,” which is interpreted “towards home,” is repeated. Brahms also emphasizes this idea of finding home by returning from a short modulation to A major back to the “home” key of A-flat major. The descent down the applied chords in measures 58–61 back to the home key in the final measures solidifies the sense of finality of death. The second verse starts in major in the grain fields where the text states that the soft breeze is flowing. The shift to minor appropriately falls when the scene reaches the forest, a symbol of death, and the starry sky, a vision of heaven.

Although both Schumann and Brahms create an beautiful space, Schumann focuses more on the unearthly quality of the night with his open dissonances, whereas Brahms focus on the opposite—the very natural beauty of the night through diatonic arpeggiation in order to contrast the eerie foreshadowing of death.