In 1782, the beloved German writer and poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe graced his friends and fans with yet another masterpiece ballad: “Der Erlkönig.” Inspired by Nordic mythology surrounding a dark elven king, Goethe penned the exhilarating, mystical, and ultimately tragic tale of a father’s desperate ride to save his ailing son, as the delirious child succumbs to the seduction of the “Erlkönig,” or the Elf King (Swales 2002, 29). The poem was an immediate success within both the artistic and the general community, and quickly served to inspire other artists in turn. Musicians, many of whom were a part of Goethe’s own social circle, began setting the words to song, resulting in a variety of German Lieder that shared the exciting text. Goethe, a trained pianist and cellist and a general lover of music, was known to have appreciated these musical workings, and was even likely to have encouraged them (Moore 2012, 23-24). And yet, as Goethe’s text was quickly becoming one of the most widely musically set poems, he had no way of knowing that the setting which would become the most famous and iconic had not yet even been drafted. In fact, its composer had not yet even been born.

Franz Schubert was born in 1797 to a lower-middle class Viennese family. His father was a schoolmaster, and he received a solid education, both in general studies and in music. Shy, homely, and not especially privileged, Schubert amazed his peers and teachers with his impressive work ethic, his sheer intelligence, and his immense talent. These traits won him prestigious educational opportunities along with a supportive circle of friends, most of whom were older, and many of whom were wealthier (Kerman 2012, 242). With their encouragement, and with that of his very musical family, a thirteen-year-old Schubert first took to composition. Building up an impressive and diverse musical catalogue, yet lacking the prospects of a promising career, he reluctantly followed his father’s footsteps, taking a position as a schoolteacher. Still, despite his busy schedule, an 18-year-old Schubert certainly found time to compose. In fact, he was more
productive than ever, averaging 65 new bars of music per day. Entirely unable to secure large halls, he presented his music at intimate gatherings of friends and family, later dubbed Shubertiades (Winter). Interestingly enough, his weaknesses turned into strengths. A demand for chamber music rather than large-scale orchestral works, combined with his job-induced study of literary greats, directed a young Schubert to what would become his signature genre, and the genre in which he would set his famous rendition of Goethe’s “Erlkönig”: the Lied.

Schubert had inherited a relatively large but still-evolving Lied tradition. Lieder had emerged as a distinctive German art form in the mid 18th century, paralleling the literary development of lyric poetry. Compared to its neighboring countries, Germany lacked large-scale unity on many levels, and due to a variety of factors such as church politics and cultural insulation, it was relatively sheltered from Enlightenment ideas. Thus, the Lied of the people became a simple song, strophic settings of texts for voice and accompaniment, often with folk roots and mythological subjects (Moore 2012, 9-15). It was a humble but popular genre, one born in the Classical Era and waiting to be raised to its Romantic potential — a challenge that Schubert seemed to have accepted eagerly. In fact, many musicologists have argued the true birth date of the Lied to be October 19th, 1814, a year of great experimentation and growth for Schubert, the year before he would compose his famous “Erlkönig” setting (Winter).

How did this all happen? How did a young, and virtually unknown musician, almost singlehandedly surpass a whole generation of Lieder composers and a whole Lieder tradition? Through an analysis of Schubert’s “Erlkönig,” I shall demonstrate how Schubert’s brilliance and boldness in the composition of this piece not only secured his work as the most iconic setting of Goethe’s text, but also contributed to the development of the Romantic Lied genre.

Schubert’s masterpiece “Erlkönig” embodies many characteristics that are arguably contemporarily quite unique. Perhaps the most basic of these traits is his approach towards the actual composition of the piece itself. He took the process very seriously. He wrote a through-composed Lied, creating new music for each verse of the poem, at a time when more basic strophic
settings were the norm. And though the first draft was written in a supposed fit of passion, Schubert went on to seriously rework the piece on at least three different occasions. This was done at a point in musical history when Lieder were not being given so much careful consideration — it was typical for composers to pump them out quickly and with little afterthought. In fact, in working as he did, Schubert was making an exception to his own rule, as he had spent the year of 1815 producing 145 Lieder in addition to other works. But “Erlkönig” was carefully edited over a span of time. Furthermore, most of Schubert’s edits were made in the accompaniment, the dynamics, and the pacing, such as the addition and subtraction of several piano measures (Woodstra 2005, 1196). This indicates the composer’s clear desire to do more than just create a pleasant or tuneful melody but also to compose a serious, unified, and carefully thought-out musical piece.

Just as Schubert put great work into the writing process, he expected his musicians to put work into the performance. “Erlkönig” was not written for amateur musicians, as was the standard of Lieder. In fact, “Erlkönig” could only be performed well by highly trained musical artists with professional-level skills, as both the accompaniment and the vocal line are highly demanding. While the vocal range is by no means extreme, spanning only an octave and a fifth, it requires the singer to rapidly switch back and forth between registers and to take on contrasting timbres, in order to represent the voices of the four different characters (Roden 2006, 1117). It was actually relatively common during the 18th century for four singers to divide up the parts and sing them individually, so as to alleviate this difficulty. Apparently, Schubert would often sing the voice of the father (Winter). As for the accompaniment, the relentlessly pounding octave triplets in the right hand demand profound levels of speed, control and stamina — levels of ability that even Schubert himself lacked. In performance, he would regularly omit the triplets, replacing them with eighth notes. He explained this by simply saying, “They are too difficult for me, a virtuoso may play them” (Gorrell 1993, 115). At Schubert’s own gatherings, that “virtuoso” was often the famous composer, arranger, and pianist Franz Liszt. Such demands represent an obvious change in standard and quality of the Lied: this was no longer just an easy and fun parlor song.
It would actually be Liszt who would bring Schubert’s “Erlkönig,” and symbolically the Lied itself, out of the home and into the concert hall. The younger composer was completely infatuated with the musicality and virtuosity that he saw in Schubert’s work, particularly in his Lieder. In fact, he had even contemplated setting aside some of his own musical endeavors for a while in order to focus on writing a biography of Schubert. After Schubert’s untimely passing, Liszt took to transposing a number of his Lieder for solo piano, including “Erlkönig.” His first goal was to advance the already impressive technique required by Schubert’s duos, presenting both the melody and accompaniment within a self-contained piano piece, while maintaining all of the original’s musical sense and substance. His second, and perhaps more important goal, was to celebrate the deceased composer. Presented as a piano piece, Schubert’s “Erlkönig” suddenly gained entrance into a new venue, the concert hall, and even into new geographical regions such as France. In addition, many listeners became more comfortable with accepting the merits and sophistication of Schubert’s original once they had heard Liszt’s transcription (Walker 2014, 32). Eventually they even acknowledged the Lieder of Schubert and others in their own right, and welcomed them too into concert halls as serious works of art.

This status change was certainly well deserved. Focusing in on the piece, Schubert’s “Erlkönig” is brimming with wonderful musical details for the listeners not just to enjoy, but also to appreciate, to reflect on, and maybe even to contemplate. Schubert possessed an impressive understanding of the human voice, acquired during his youth as a choirboy, and a remarkable sense of melody. When listening to almost any of Schubert’s Lieder, these gifts of his are made quite evident, even to an untrained ear. Rather than just relying on these skills to create tuneful songs, Schubert used his skills to further express and enhance the text. His friend Leopold von Sonnleithner once commented on Schubert’s melodies and harmonies, remarking that they “[…] follow [the associated text] closely in every respect, and always interpret the poet profoundly” (Gorrell 1993, 118).

This becomes apparent from the opening of “Erlkönig.” The first measure consists of only pounding triplet G’s stacked in octaves, but there are 23 of them. His second measure is essentially the same as the first, with the addition of a G-minor
scale in the bass clef. The emptiness of the octaves is foreboding; the pounding of the triplets is suspenseful; the tone of the minor scale is dark. Two measures in, and Schubert has already set the scene perfectly (“Schubert”).

When the text finally enters in the 15th measure, the audience already has a strong sense of what is to follow. Schubert has used the music to introduce the text, and now he begins to explore the text. One of his most famous techniques for this is the previously mentioned manipulation of the melody to represent the different voices of the characters. The narrator opens, singing with relative neutrality in the middle of the song’s register. The father’s voice follows and is quickly established in the lower register, his musical lines moving with a certain stiffness, an implied gruffness. The son’s voice enters third and is in a contrasting higher register, jumpy and agitated. And finally there is the music of the Elf King, which distinguishes itself entirely from that of the other three. It drips in desire and allure. The phantom opens the third stanza, seductively whispering his tempting text in a clearly marked pianissimo, with a line that is easily sing-able, alarmingly sweet, and starkly major (Kapilow 2011, 55-56). The fifth character has no distinct melodic voice, but he has been present since the opening of the song: Schubert’s horse, his existence made known only by those triplets that mimic the pounding of hoof beats.

But Schubert’s music does far more than just foreshadow and identify the characters — its true merit lies in its evolvement with the characters, following them through their journey. As the child’s fear heightens, so does his voice. He cries out in the fourth stanza, “Mein Vater, Mein Vater,” his voice shrieking out an E-flat that grinds against the piano’s recurring D. The growth of this wrenching tension is the perfect musical equivalent of the intensification of the child’s panic (Kapilow 2011, 56). As the young boy succumbs further to his illusions, the father forces himself deeper into denial. His attempt to redirect the child’s thoughts is mirrored in his redirection of the child’s music (Kapilow 2011, 59), pushing into the remote key of B minor on the way to a G major cadence (“Schubert”). But just as the moments of major-key sonority seem too stark and sudden when sung by the Elf King, here they seem too fleeting. The “goodness” is an illusion.
And an illusion can only be maintained for so long. In the seventh stanza, the Elf King reveals his true colors. The character, who until now has been identified by “light” sounds, shifts his façade, echoed by Schubert’s shift in key. He offers the boy one more sweet solicitation of love, contrasting the D-minor piano interlude with an E-flat major entrance (Kapilow 2011, 64). And when he receives no answer, his lyrics for the first time turn threatening, and his music minor: “Und bist du nicht willig, so brauch’ ich Gewalt [And if you’re not willing, then I’ll use force]” (“Schubert”). By linking the music so closely to the text, Schubert is actually able to completely reestablish the Elf King’s identifying music without losing his audience, and thus is able to redefine the mad spirit’s character.

Even the horse experiences musical development: when the Elf King first enters in measure 57, the triplets that had been previously performed exclusively by the right hand are broken up between both hands, the left hand playing only directly on the beat, and the right hand finishing off the remaining two notes of each of the triplets, creating a waltz-like effect (“Schubert”). When the Elf King reenters in the 86th measure, the right hand continues to play the entirety of the triplets, but this time they are running arpeggios as opposed to the chords that have been pervasive throughout (“Schubert”). Again, this brings out a sweet dance-like quality in the music. This change in the accompaniment not only serves as yet another way to identify the presence of the Elf King, but also the child’s battle with hallucination. The horse’s steady hoof prints have served to ground the song, and the little boy’s sense of reality. As they are distorted by the sweet façade of the Elf King, the child is losing touch, the horse, his father, and life itself becoming more distant.

Not only does the music develop with the characters — it also evolves with the plot. In measure 131, as the tension and the father’s desperation mount, the relentless triplets that have been pounding through the right hand are matched simultaneously in the left hand (“Schubert”). The father rides faster, the music speeding up with him to accelerando. He arrives with a struggle, the left hand of the piano ascending chromatically through measure 140. He slows in sheer exhaustion, the music trailing off with him. The song is about to end, and it is here that Schubert,
the master of melody, makes a musical choice that is nothing short of fascinating.

There is one line left, a single line to convey the end of the story and the fate of the boy. One would expect, after the fantastic melodies that Schubert has woven thus far, that the final line would trump them all. But in fact, Schubert does just the opposite: the final line, “In seinen Armen das Kind war tot,” is written in recitative. This is quite wild. As musicologist John Reed notes, the vast majority of the poem and song is constructed of direct speech, and yet here, in one of the few moments of narration, recitative is utilized, unaccompanied, and unembellished (Schubert, “Erlkönig” 223). A cadence follows to signify the end. This single line shocks, it thwarts all listeners’ expectations. For the first and only line in the poem, Goethe uses a reflective past tense. It is over and done, there is nothing more to be said. Following his lead, Schubert makes no attempt to compose a screeching melodic line that fanfares the devastation and tragedy. Instead, he offers listeners a bare and haunting recitative that perfectly captures and reflects on the emptiness and sorrow of the reality: “[In his arms, the child was dead]” (Schubert).

Still, despite the inclusion of all these incredible details and the careful artistry he demonstrated, Schubert did manage to respect the roots of the genre for which he was composing. Lieder were never meant to be so complicated that the average listener could not appreciate them. And so, instead of just making “Erlkönig” simple, Schubert worked to make it accessible. The entirety of the first 15 measures contains only three musical ideas, each highly functional and easy to follow (Schubert). And the signature rhythm of the piece ingrains itself into the brains of listeners as easily as that of Beethoven’s 5th, while offering a sense of large-scale unity. Schubert’s “Erlkönig” was made sophisticated but not un-relatable, catchy but not trite, memorable but not unworthy of consideration.

This is ultimately where the only other setting at the time that was not completely strophic, that of Ludwig van Beethoven, fell short. Beethoven’s rendition is not just through composed, but almost fragmented. It could not be called melodic by any standard, and while there are some recurring musical sections, especially within the accompaniment, they do little to tie the piece together
as a whole, making the Lied very difficult for the audience to follow ("Unheard"). So much in fact that it tends to draw the attention of listeners away from the text. Although Beethoven’s song features some unquestionably well-written musical sections, it lacks the entertainment value of Schubert’s setting, ultimately detaching it from the very essence of the Lied tradition. Goethe verbally rejected Beethoven’s setting for the piece’s flaws, but more importantly for how it failed to align with his vision. This, along with other factors, resulted in Beethoven’s loss of desire to even attempt to have it published. For a century, his rendition remained almost unknown among his many fans, with the exception of fellow musicians and his most ardent admirers, Schubert apparently included.

Beethoven’s setting was simply not what Goethe had intended when he encouraged composers to set his poem “Erlkönig.” The ballad had originally been written as a part of his 1782 Die Fischerin, and was meant to be a tale conveyed by the provincial character Dortchen. Goethe expressed a conviction that musical settings of his ballad should sacrifice potential theatrical finesse in order to better represent the simple nature of the character for which it was written. Simply put, he wanted tuneful, primarily strophic settings that, after a few stanzas of listening, the audience could easily be singing along to (Byrne 2004, 66).

This is perfectly exemplified in a Lied by one of the composers Goethe did accolade, Carl Friedrich Zelter. Zelter likely could not have written an overly complex setting of the poem had he tried. He was a self-taught pianist with little formal training and no special mark of brilliance, who spent his life composing naught but Lieder and church music (Moore 2012, 32-35). Within his “Erlkönig,” the folk-inspired vocal line bounces along, arpeggiating the unembellished chords that are being plunked out in the piano accompaniment ("Gerard"). There is little that distinguishes the music from that of any other Lied he had written, which likely was not entirely unintentional. After all, Zelter believed wholeheartedly in the primacy of the text in song composition, which surely stroked Goethe’s ego. Zelter himself once expressed his compositional “conservatism,” directly acknowledging how different his Lied was from that of Schubert and Beethoven. And this approach certainly won Goethe’s praise — he was even invited to the poet’s home to give a private performance of

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"Erlkönig" and others of his Lieder born of Goethe's texts (Moore 2012, 32-35).

That which Goethe had praised was far from that which Schubert had written. But then again, all of Schubert's celebrated layers of musical depth would not have been possible to incorporate, had his Lied relied on sheer simplicity and a strophic form. Schubert could not possibly have used his composition to explore and enhance the text, if he had just used the music to accompany it and show it off—if the same simple musical material had simultaneously served all of the poem's stanzas.

And yet, choosing to liberate himself from the form was a bold decision for Schubert to make, especially having known how his two predecessors had been received. But while Schubert went against Goethe's wishes, it was not done in spite or in rebellion. It is well known that Schubert wanted Goethe to like his piece. In fact, he even expressed a desire that Goethe might be able to help him gain the interest of a publisher (Kapilow 2011, 41-42). And so, we are left to see this act of boldness as Schubert taking ownership of the ballad—as him taking it out of the context in which it was written and using his music not just to match the text, but perhaps even to honestly try to enhance it. This choice represents Schubert stepping out of the composer's bounds, and it is not the only example of this within "Erlkönig."

The inclusion of the horse's footsteps is another instance of Schubert's daring. While Goethe's ballad does express the idea that the father is riding, the horse is by no means a principal character. By making his hoof beats a constant in the song, Schubert turns the horse not just into a central character, but also into a highly functional character. And this unquestionably shifts the dynamic of Goethe's ballad.

In this same sense, Schubert plays with the functional roles of the father and the son. Musicologist David Schroeder discusses this, highlighting that within Goethe's poem and the legend upon which it was based, the anxiety and terror seems to be shared equally between the father and the son. In fact, the father is the first character to express concern in his entrance line, asking why the child hides his head. But Schubert, young at the time of composition, shifts all the terror and sympathy towards the
child. By having the child’s vocal range slowly increase with his fear, without changing that of the father, he has given the child great control of the piece’s overall mood—control that Schroeder argues the child’s character did not have in the original text (27). This is yet another brave stylistic choice on Schubert’s part.

To take such liberties was not expected of Lieder composers at the time, and it was ultimately done at the risk of rejection from the original poet. Ultimately, Goethe never embraced Schubert’s setting of his text, as he had so hoped he would. He had heard it performed live on at least two occasions, but offered Schubert no praise. He did not help the younger man to find a publisher, and the personal copy of the manuscript that Schubert sent him was found unopened among his possessions at the time of his death. And while this must have been crushing for Schubert, to be discouraged by one he so admired, perhaps it was a good thing. Perhaps the very reasons why Goethe rejected Schubert’s work are the same reasons why his “Erlkönig” ultimately garnered lasting fame and genre significance.

By approaching Goethe’s poem in a way other than that which the poet sanctioned his friends to, and by approaching the Lied genre in a way other than that which had been established in the musical community, Schubert was creating a truly unique composition. This, combined with his sheer compositional cleverness and artistry, resulted in a piece that not only exuded greatness, but stood out in the sea of interpretations by other composers. And through the success of his “Erlkönig” and other works, Schubert helped change the standard of the genre, raising it from a simple style of writing tunes to an esteemed style of musical composition, all while respecting its roots. Thus, Schubert’s “Erlkönig” not only set the standard for musical takes on Goethe’s work, but it also helped set the standard for the new Lied: the Romantic Lied.

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