

# ***Phonetic Journey***

***A Lecture Recital On Sound and Translation***

**Supplemental Notes on *Winterreise*  
and Singable Translations**

# ***Winterreise* in Translation**

*Winterreise* is a song cycle composed by Franz Schubert in 1827, to a text by Wilhelm Müller. The cycle traces the journey of the protagonist, the wanderer, through a frigid winterscape. His beloved has fallen for another, and so the wanderer sets off alone in the cold. Throughout the cycle, the wanderer struggles with intense feelings of grief and loss that are never resolved.

Schubert's music captures both the protagonist's inner turmoil as well as the harsh environment around him. The voice and piano share an equal partnership in storytelling. The piano writing often depicts external forces in vivid detail, such as gusts of wind or the wanderer chipping away at the icy surface of a frozen river with a sharp stone. At other times, it portrays the wanderer's deteriorating psyche.

*Winterreise* has seen numerous singable translations in English since its inception. One of the earlier efforts came in the 1901 Universal Edition, written by the English poet and translator, Percy Pinkerton. In the early 1920s, following the First World War, the Australian baritone Nelson Illingworth gained prominence in New York for performances of his own translations of *Winterreise* and other lieder. Through these translations, Illingworth and others helped reintroduce lieder to audiences in the United States and England during a time when German music was considered in a less than positive light, if not outright prohibited.

Over the past two decades, a wealth of new singable translations of *Winterreise* have been fielded. Perhaps the most notable is a version penned by Jeremy Sams, which was recorded in 2017 by the English baritone Roderick Williams, and English pianist Christopher Glynn.

# Singable Translations and Phonetics

Singable translations have a long history as a tool to broaden the reach of foreign language music to new audiences. Today, however, singable translations face considerable resistance within the musical community. Objections typically fall under two categories. The first is philosophical, contending that translations must always be a reduction of the original work. The second kind of objection is a practical one: most singable translations lack quality, sounding awkward and unconvincing in their new language.

In spite of these objections, hearing vocal music in one's native language provides important benefits worthy of consideration. All too distracting is the familiar rustle of program notes as the audience struggles to read printed translations in the gloom of the hall or theater. The reality is that many listeners go to concerts featuring classical vocal music in foreign languages without the intimate knowledge of the texts that the singers and, perhaps, scholars in the audience, take for granted. Singable translations provide a point of access for new listeners, and the quality of those translations bears directly on the listener's appreciation of the music.

Current translation theory prioritizes the transfer of poetic meaning and structure. My research aims to extend existing theories by integrating phonetics (the sounds of language) into their methodology. That is, considering how the quality of translations can be improved by giving attention to the vocal sounds used, and how those sounds relate to the underlying music.

Music and poetry have often been treated as separable entities in the translation process. I challenge this assumption by arguing that the sounds of a poem serve a musical function which is, in many cases, intimately bound to a composer's setting of that poem. I propose that

the phonetic properties of a poem can be an important expressive device that should be given similar consideration to poetic meaning.

Crafting a singable translation involves balancing several factors that often conflict with one another. Some of these factors are interpretive, such as meaning, tone or mood, and how “natural” a translation sounds. Others are more tangible, such as rhyme scheme and poetic rhythm. Unlike a poetic translation, where an author may take many liberties to ensure that a text reads well in another language, in singable translation the music provides a rigid structure to which the translator must adhere. One translation might be very accurate to the specific meaning of the original text, but sound very awkward. Another might sound quite natural, but convey little of the source text’s nuances.

The physical sound of a text is one of these factors that, on the whole, finds itself underappreciated. We are dealing with music, after all, and that means sound. The sounds of language are just as much a part of the music of a song as the melody and harmony.

I hope to, through the examples we will explore today, give you an interest in singable translations, and perhaps even given you some new ways of thinking about the way language portrays musical features in a broader sense!

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