

Web Feature 31.2

Narrative devices in Schubert's "Erlkönig"

Franz Schubert's song "Erlkönig," written in 1815 when the composer was just eighteen, presents a striking example of how music can enhance a narrative. The text of the song comes from a poem by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and it, in turn, is based on German and Danish folklore. *Erlkönig* means "Alder King," referring to the Black Alder tree found throughout Europe; the Alder King is a spirit of death who lures children away, enticing them with false promises. In Goethe's poem, a father is frantically riding on horseback through the Black Alder forest with his dying child, "through night and wind." The child, riding in the arms of his father, sees the Erl-King, is frightened and begs his father for aid; the father attempts to comfort his child by responding that the spirit is merely imaginary.

Schubert was faithful in his setting of the text; there are no omissions or repetitions of lines from the original poem. The poem's dramatic structure splits easily into lines of "dialogue" between father, son, the Erl-King, and an anonymous narrator. This allowed Schubert to use harmony to differentiate among the three main characters of the narrative; changes in their character or psychological states are also reflected in changes in the treatment of harmony. The following is a literal translation of Goethe's poem, interspersed with analysis of Schubert's musical treatment of the text.

Who rides, so late, through night and wind?
It is the father with his child.
He holds the boy in the crook of his arm
He holds him safe, he keeps him warm.

The narrator is detached from the action, not being one of the characters, and only appears at the beginning and end of the poem. Perhaps because of this, the first stanza is an independent unit, beginning and ending in the tonic of G minor. The sense of urgency is vividly conveyed by the quick tempo and the piano's incessant and insistent repeated-triplets rhythm (also a physically demanding gesture for the pianist), a sonic and kinetic anaphora for the madly galloping horse. The first line of text is a question, and as if to reinforce this, the opening vocal line features a dominant (rather than tonic) prolongation (Web Example 31.3, measures 15–19). The answer to the question is accompanied by a brief modulation to and perfect authentic cadence in the relative major key (Web

Example 31.3, measures 20–24). This first perfect authentic cadence defines the end of the first couplet and the midpoint of this first formal section. Of course, we would expect the relative major key, one of the closest of closely related keys, to be a stylistically appropriate choice for a modulation. The tonic returns soon enough, with the line “er fasst ihn sicher, er halt ihn warm” (“he holds him safe, he keeps him warm”). As the father holds his child closer to his breast to give him security, so Schubert metaphorically “holds us close” to the tonic.

15 **D**

Wer rei - tet so spät durch Nacht und Wind?

pp

g: V i⁴ V i⁴ V

PED

20 **(D) PD D T**

Es ist der Va - ter mit sei - nem Kind; er

V V⁷/iv iv⁶ 6 - 5 / 4 - 3 V I

Bb: ii⁶

Web Example 31.3. Schubert, “Erlkönig,” mm 15–24.

The next stanza begins with a question-and-answer dialogue between the father and son; it also contains the first reference to the Erl-King.

“My son, why do you hide your face so anxiously?”
 “Father, do you not see the Erl-King?
 The Erl-King with crown and cloak?”
 “My son, it is a wisp of fog.”

The father’s question ends—appropriately interrogatively—with a tonicizing cadence on iv. Schubert sets the child’s response—“Father, do you not see the Erl-King?”—as a prolongation of that same iv chord, using a dissonant $\text{vii}^{\circ 6}_5/\text{iv}$ over a C pedal tone (Web Example 31.4). This is the most dissonant harmony we have encountered so far, and—as we will learn—the clash of the fully diminished seventh chord (which contains two “satanic” tritones) over the pedal tone is a harmony well suited to portray the character of the Erl-King. The father’s reassuring response coincides with an authentic cadence in the relative major key, setting up the first lines of dialogue from the Erl-King.

41

Siehst, Va - ter, du den Erl - kö - nig nicht?

pp

PED

PED

g: iv $\text{vii}^{\circ 6}_5/\text{iv}$ i $\text{vii}^{\circ 6}_5/\text{iv}$ iv
 (C ped.) (C ped.)

CPT

Web Example 31.4. “Erlkönig,” mm. 41–45.

“You lovely child, come, go with me!

Many a lovely game I'll play with you;
Some colorful flowers are on the shore,
My mother has some golden robes.”

The Erl-King first attempts to entice the child away with promises of games and attractions that appeal to the senses: flowers and (presumably) soft golden robes. (There is no mention of the child's mother in the poem, so perhaps the Erl-King is offering the maternal comforts of his mother as well.) He is trying to “put on a good face,” so to speak, and in this context it is interesting to observe how Schubert has transformed his compositional materials. First, the incessant, hammering repeated-triplet motive of the accompaniment has been subtly changed to a jig-like skipping pattern by the placement of triplet-eighth rests on the beat in the right hand (Web Example 31.5). Web Example 31.5 also shows the Erl-King's “version” of the dissonant pedal prolongation introduced by the child's portrayal (Web Example 31.4, measures 42 and 44); notice that here the prolongation involves a V^7 , rather than a vii^{o6}_5 , over the pedal tone—a subtle “softening” of the harmony by changing a single note.

58

"Du lie - - - - bes Kind, komm,

ppp

B \flat : V I V⁷ (B \flat pedal)

Detailed description: This musical score shows measures 58-61. The vocal line (treble clef) has a melody: G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), A4-G4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), C4 (quarter). The piano accompaniment (bass clef) features a constant eighth-note arpeggiated bass line (pedal) in the left hand and chords in the right hand. The chords are: B \flat major (V), C minor (I), F \flat major (V⁷), and B \flat major (V⁷). The dynamic marking *ppp* is placed above the piano part.

60

geh mit mir! gar

I V⁷ (B \flat pedal)

Detailed description: This musical score shows measures 60-61. The vocal line (treble clef) has a melody: G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), A4-G4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), C4 (quarter). The piano accompaniment (bass clef) continues with the eighth-note arpeggiated bass line and chords. The chords are: C minor (I) and F \flat major (V⁷). The dynamic marking *ppp* is implied from the previous system.

Web Example 31.5. “Erlkönig,” mm. 58–61.

“My father, my father, can’t you hear
 what the Erl-King quietly promised me?”
 “Be calm, stay calm, my child;
 in the dry leaves the wind is rustling.”

The next stanza begins with the first of three desperate pleas from the child to his father. The cry of the child is also set to a moment of strong dissonance, as an upper neighbor in the melodic line clashes with the arpeggiated V₅⁶ supporting it (measures 73–76). With each appearance Schubert sets the text a step higher, conveying the increasing

panic in the child's cries (compare measures 73–76 with measures 98–101 and 124–127). With the father's response, Schubert veers into the foreign key of B minor (Web Example 31.6, measures 80–81). The father's response soon modulates to G major (measures 82–86), which is also technically a foreign key even though it is the parallel major of the tonic. The fact that both of these keys are distant from the tonic perhaps helps to illustrate the father's oblivious “distance” from what is happening to his child.

73 [CHILD] UN UN
 Mein Va - ter, mein Va - ter, und hö - rest du nicht, was

77 LN CPT CPT [FATHER]
 Er - len - kö - nig mir lei - se ver - spricht? Sei ru - hig,

g: V⁶₅

i UN CPT V⁴₃ CPT I⁶ (implied) | b: i (implied) ii^{o6} $\begin{matrix} 6 & - & 5 \\ 4 & - & 3 \end{matrix}$ V i

Web Example 31.6. “Erlkönig,” mm. 73–81.

“Do you want to come with me, fine lad?
 My daughters should be waiting for you;
 My daughters lead the nightly dances

and will rock and dance and sing you to sleep.”

The Erk-King tries again to entice the child away to his world (measures 87–96). This time the accompaniment is a lilting, spinning arpeggio figuration (Web Example 31.7), in the “bright” key of C Major. Note the return of the “polite” Erl-König pedal prolongation in measure 88.

87

"Willst, fei - ner Kna - be, du mit mir gehn? meine Töch - ter sol - len dich war - ten schön;

ppp

C: V_5^6 I V_7 (C pedal) I V_7/vi vi V_7/vi vi

Web Example 31.7. “Erlkönig,” mm. 87–90a.

“My father, my father, can’t you see there,
The Erl-King’s daughters in the gloomy place?”
“My son, my son, I see it well;
the old willows seem so gray.”

The second of the child’s desperate cries is set a step higher, as mentioned earlier; this has the result of setting the cadence in anticipation of the father’s response a step higher as well, briefly touching on C \sharp minor. A full tritone away from the tonic, there is perhaps no better way to illustrate this “distant” father’s unawareness of the situation. By the end of the father’s response, the music has modulated to D minor, which is at least a closely related key. In the following section, however, it is too late—the Erl-König reveals his true evil. In German and Danish folklore, if the Alder King’s face is kind, then the death will be peaceful; if his face is angry, the death will be painful and frightening. Here, the Erl-König drops his “polite” façade and presents himself with the dominant-

seventh chord over the pedal prolongation motive that the child first saw back in measures 42–45.

“I love you, your beautiful form entices me;
and if you’re not willing, I shall use force.”
“My father, my father, he’s grabbing me now!
The Erl-King has wounded me!”

This stanza begins with a striking appearance of the Erl-King’s “true” pedal prolongation, this time prolonging E \flat major, the Neapolitan chord (\flat II) of D minor, and delaying the resolution to V with a fully-diminished seventh chord and a secondary leading-tone seventh chord (Web Example 31.8). Nowhere else in the song do we find so many tritone-laden, fully-diminished seventh chords, and, of course, the root motion from the root-position Neapolitan chord to the V is also the interval of a tritone. The son’s last cry brings the music back to the tonic and the return of the narrator.

116

"Ich lie - be dich, mich reizt dei - ne schö - ne Ge - stalt; und

pp

d: i \flat II $\text{vii}^{\circ 5/\flat\text{II}}$ \flat II

120

bist du nicht wil - lig, so brauch' ich Ge - walt."

fff

$vii^{\circ 4}_3$ $vii^{\circ 7}/V$ $\begin{matrix} 6 & - & 5 \\ 4 & - & 3 \end{matrix}$ V i

Web Example 31.8. “Erlkönig,” mm. 116–123a.

The father shudders; he rides swiftly,
 He holds in his arms the moaning child.
 Barely he arrives at the yard in urgency;
 In his arms, the child was dead.

With single-minded determination, the father rushes homeward. Perhaps to underscore that determination, the music relentlessly hammers home the tonic, prolonging the tonic until finally moving to the iv chord at measure 140. At measure 143, however, there is a surprise movement to $A\flat$ major, the Neapolitan ($\flat II$) of the tonic; measure 144 contains the Erl-King’s “true” pedal prolongation involving the fully-diminished seventh chord. As the narrator tells us that the father has at last arrived home, the music tells us that it is at this point that the Erl-King has killed the child. The accompaniment ceases its relentless movement for the first time ever in the song at measure 146, on a Neapolitan sixth chord, resolved with emphatic finality when the father discovers that his child is dead (Web Example 31.9).

141



er - reicht den Hof mit Müh' und

fz *fz*

g: iv (implied) bII vii^O_3/bII (Ab pedal)

145

Recit.



Noth; in sei-nen Ar - men das Kind war todt.

Andante.

fp *pp* *p* *f*

bII bII^6 vii^O_7/V $V7$ i

Web Example 31.9. “Erlkönig,” mm. 141–148.