
Illuminating Text: A Macro Analysis of Franz Schubert's "Auf dem Wasser zu singen"

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In "Auf dem Wasser zu singen," Franz Schubert embellishes a sentimental poem by L. Graf zu Stollberg to create a fluid, melodic song of significant depth and character. One hardly needs to translate the title, "to be sung on the water," for Schubert's rhythmic and harmonic treatment of the text make this setting apparent. Schubert's musical choices provide a clear picture of a small boat drifting on a calm lake, illuminating both the atmosphere and thematic concepts of the poem.

Schubert chooses to write this song in strophic form, keeping the same musical treatment for all three stanzas of the poem. He adds only an eight bar introduction for the piano, and an extra two measures of the tonic harmony at the end. This form reveals the simple nature of the text. The speaker in the poem is content to enjoy the sunset while the water rocks him gently back and forth. While the poet does ponder the passing of time, he is in no hurry to go anywhere. By applying a strophic form, Schubert keeps his music floating peacefully on these gentle waves, without any distraction from a far off destination.

Although the key signature implies A \flat major, Schubert begins his song in A \flat minor. A \flat major does not appear until the end of each verse. By vacillating between parallel keys, Schubert continues to accentuate the aimless drifting of the boat. The shifting modalities of major and minor allow the music to rock gently back and forth, while keeping a close relationship between the harmonic progressions. Schubert chooses not to make any significant modulations to outside keys, for this would suggest too large a movement for what is implied textually. Therefore, his emphasis on modal mixture allows him to play with different sounds, without agitating the rippling waters.

Schubert's rhythmic choices contribute to the scene as well. The $\frac{6}{8}$ meter sets up a dance rhythm that helps to portray the joyful feeling of the poet as he looks out across the water. The constant running sixteenth notes in the piano accompaniment create the motion of light waves lapping at the side of the boat:



	C	G \flat ⁷	C	a \flat	E \flat ⁷	a \flat
a \flat m:	III	V ⁷ /III	III	i	V ⁷	i
C \flat M:	I	V ⁷	I			

Figure 4. Dominant to Tonic Relationships.

Schubert repeats this phrase both textually and harmonically. This helps to emphasize the poet's pseudo-rhyme scheme in which he repeats the same words at the end of each line. However, it also serves Schubert's purpose musically, for it reiterates the dominant to tonic relationship at a new pitch level without moving toward another key. Schubert's repetition of the dominant to tonic harmonic progression illustrates the sense of rocking back and forth wonderfully, so even when he decides to add some harmonic variety, he chooses to apply the same harmonic idea.

Schubert uses further methods to add interest to this repetitive progression of dominant to tonic as well. For instance, he carefully extends his dominant seventh chords (E \flat ⁷) by emphasizing the ninth of the chord (F \flat) in his cascading sixteenth note runs:



Figure 5. Schubert, "Auf dem Wasser zu singen," mm. 11–12 (piano part).

Although the ninth appears as an appoggiatura, its emphasis within the first beat of the measure and repetition as it is played with the fully stacked chord in the bass clef, evokes the sound of a dominant ninth chord. In this same fashion, Schubert also incorporates the ninth (A \flat) of the G \flat ⁷ chord in its sixteenth note run:



Figure 6. Schubert, “Auf dem Wasser zu singen,” m. 14 (piano part).

This similar presentation of nonharmonic tones above the $G\flat^7$ chord highlights its dominant function. Schubert, however, is only playing with these extensions in both chords, for by the end of the measure, the impression of the ninth has faded away, and the resolution of the seventh becomes prominent as the progression moves to the tonic. While Schubert adds interest to his harmonic structures by using extended harmony, he still remains true the dominant to tonic relationship he has set for this piece.

In addition to using extended harmonies, Schubert creates harmonic interest in his treatment of cadences. Since the majority of the movement is from dominant to tonic, cadences need to be clearly differentiated in some way. At the end of the eight bar piano introduction, Schubert employs a major VI chord ($F\flat$) before his cadence of $I\sharp$ to V^7 to I (mm. 6–8):

$F\flat$	(Gr^6)	ab^4	$E\flat^7$	ab
$a\flat:m: VI$	(Gr^6)	$i\sharp^4$	V^7	i

Figure 7. Schubert, “Auf dem Wasser zu singen,” mm. 6–8 (piano part).

This VI chord is embellished with clever nonharmonic tones in the second half of the measure, for when the D natural surfaces in the sixteenth note run it provides the subtle feeling of a Gr^6 chord. The use of a Gr^6 chord in

this position sets up an extra push towards the cadence, for the Gr^6 , with its common resolution to the i^6 , acts as a pre-dominant and helps the final dominant to tonic stand out as the ending of the phrase.

Schubert's first phrase of the vocal line ends in a half cadence (m. 12), employing movement from tonic and dominant and reversing the direction for a moment. This slight shift of backwards motion sets up the next phrase nicely, for Schubert moves to the mediant (C), its dominant (G^7), and back to the mediant (mm. 13–15). Still, as noted previously, the movement does not stray far, for the phrase continues and the cadence ends with a strong i to V^7 to i in A^\flat minor (mm. 15–16), bringing the rocking boat back safely to its starting point on the gentle waters.

Schubert's next momentary shift away from the dominant to tonic progression provides continued harmonic interest. After an exact repetition of his second phrase, cadencing again in A^\flat minor (m. 20), Schubert immediately begins his fourth phrase with an $\text{a}^{\circ 7}$ chord in first inversion:



Figure 8. Schubert, "Auf dem Wasser zu singen," mm. 21–23 (piano part).

The use of this $\text{a}^{\circ 7}$ over the next two and half measures (mm. 21–23) provides Schubert with many possibilities and brings a new sense of texture and variety to his composition. Since fully diminished seventh chords are often used as pivot chords to help modulate to a new key, Schubert seems to be contemplating a new direction upon the waves. In fact, even his use of the D natural as a nonharmonic tone in the sixteenth note run above the diminished chord helps accentuate the potential modulation to a B^\flat major chord. However, Schubert's consistent faithfulness to the calm scene on the water dictates that the music remain within the A^\flat minor / major modality, and not stray too far away from dominant to tonic relationship he has established so securely.

Schubert, then, does not actually use this diminished chord to send the song spinning far outside the key. Instead, he brings the piece safely back to A^\flat minor by resolving the diminished chord to a d^\flat minor chord:



Figure 9. Schubert, “Auf dem Wasser zu singen,” mm. 23–25 (piano part).

By understanding that the fully diminished chord is actually used to tonicize $d\flat$, it is easy to reconcile the previous two and half measures as an enharmonic spelling of a c^{o7} chord. Now this phrase moves smoothly in $A\flat$ minor from vii^{o7}/iv to iv to V^7 to i (mm. 23–25). Additionally, by using the c^{o7} in root position, Schubert highlights the first appearance of C natural in this piece. Although the phrase still ends convincingly in $A\flat$ minor, the C natural foreshadows Schubert’s move towards $A\flat$ major.

After creating this slight diversion, as if the boat has encountered a small eddy of water, Schubert uses the final phrase of the verse to bring the song back to its peaceful state of rocking. The vocal line of this phrase begins with the $E\flat$ held for almost two measures (mm. 26–27). As previously discussed, the change in the rhythmic movement signifies that the poet in the boat has recognized he is still in the same place as where he started. However, the pitch of $E\flat$ holds significance as well, for it serves as a kind of dominant prolongation, while the chords in the piano accompaniment sway back and forth from $E\flat^7$ to $a\flat$ minor, and then to $E\flat^7$ to $A\flat$ major. The foreshadowed movement from minor to major tonality finally takes place in this last phrase.

Schubert now employs a circle progression other than the dominant to tonic for the first time in the song:

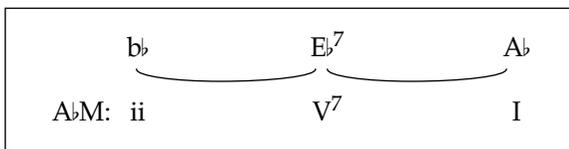


Figure 10. Supertonic–Dominant–Tonic Circle Progressions.

Although the progression of the supertonic to the dominant is common in music, Schubert makes the movement significant for two reasons. First, it is the only circle progression used that reaches outside the dominant to tonic harmonic motive. Second, this is the only time Schubert combines two circle progressions together. By linking these two circle progressions Schubert establishes his strongest cadence of the song, and ends the verse in $A\flat$ major.

Schubert's musical setting of this text is truly poetic. By employing a very limited number of harmonic progressions and rhythmic patterns, Schubert is able to illuminate the deeper meaning of this poem. As the poet has witnessed the drifting waters, undistressed by his lack of direction, time has taken its circular course from east to west, through yesterday, today, and tomorrow, and proven to be an illusion. Schubert's composition has applied this circular motion to create an atmosphere of pure joy in which to observe the moment, and relinquish all distractions of a destination. It is the here and now that remains important, and Schubert's graceful song convinces his audience to be content rocking on nature's tranquil waters.