Dramatic Expression in Schubert's *Erlkönig*

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Abstract. While current research on Schubert's Erlkönig mainly focuses on compositional techniques, vocal performance, piano accompaniment and Romantic style, relatively little attention has been paid to its dramatic expression. Building on these foundations, this article takes Schubert's Erlkönig as a piece of musical drama, exploring its character portrayal in a dramatic context. Focusing on how Schubert integrates music and drama in a Romantic style, the article adopts methods of musical and textual analysis to examine the character depiction, music structure, musical materials, and dramatic expression of the work in depth. Attention has been paid to the relationship between the music and text. The conclusion suggests that in Erlkönig, Schuber skillfully integrates text and music in a Romantic idiom, through its profound dramatic intention and compositional technique. This study not only offers a perspective for analyzing Schubert's music, but also provides valuable insights for understanding and appreciating Classical and Romantic-era repertoire.

Keywords: Erlkönig, Dramatic expression, Schubert.

1 Introduction

Within the broad academic landscape of existing research, Franz Schubert's renowned art song Erlkönig has been extensively examined. Scholars have not only delved into its distinctive aesthetic characteristics as an art song but have also meticulously investigated its sophisticated compositional techniques, artistic vocal interpretation, the art of piano accompaniment, and the rich application of harmonic vocabulary. These inquiries have laid a solid theoretical foundation for understanding this work[1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13].

Building upon a solid foundation of existing academic research, this paper aims to further expand the scope of inquiry, adopting the unique and novel perspective of dramatic expression as an entry point to conduct a more comprehensive and in-depth analysis of Schubert's classic art song Erlkönig. The paper will focus on exploring how the work, at the level of musical style, masterfully blends the rigorous conventions of Classicism with the ardent passion of Romanticism, forming a uniquely compelling artistic style. Regarding musical characteristics, it will delve into how the undulating melodies, controlled rhythmic tension and release, and rich harmonic variations skillfully convey

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profound emotional depth and intense dramatic tension, immersing listeners in a thrilling theatrical scenario. Furthermore, the paper will concentrate on the musical characterization of the four core roles within the work: the Narrator, the Father, the Son, and the Erlkönig. Through detailed interpretation of the musical language, it will investigate how Schubert employs distinctive musical elements to vividly and distinctly portray these characters, ultimately weaving together a dramatic tapestry of suspense and excitement that offers listeners a profoundly moving musical experience.

Erlkönig's narrative structure exhibits rigorous formal integrity and potent dramatic tension. Its melodic transformations progress from initial tranquility through intensifying agitation toward a tragic denouement, demonstrating the composer's masterful command of affective musical articulation. Through meticulously crafted atmospheric textures, the work transports listeners into a sonic realm permeated with mystique and psychological conflict. The musical characterization of distinct personae particularly manifests Schubert's genius as a master of musical drama. Each role—the Narrator, Father, Son, and Erlkönig—is endowed with distinctive musical motifs and expressive devices. Their interwoven musical narratives collectively construct the work's rich conceptual depth and profound artistic conception.

Moreover, this analysis will thoroughly examine the dialectical interplay of Classical and Romantic stylistic elements within the work. The investigation focuses on how these contrasting aesthetics interpenetrate and mutually transform one another, collectively shaping Erlkönig into a masterpiece that embodies both historical profundity and contemporary immediacy. Such inquiry promises to yield original perspectives for Schubertian Lieder scholarship.

2 Textual Analysis

2.1 Character Portrayal

In Schubert's artistically potent Erlkönig, the composer demonstrates extraordinary musical ingenuity through a dialectical interplay between voice and piano, meticulously crafting four dramatis personae with sharply differentiated psychological profiles and dramatic functions: the Narrator, Father, Son, and Erlkönig. Each persona embodies distinctive melodic contours, tonal identities, and specialized vocal techniques. Their dynamically interwoven and dramatically contrasted musical narratives collectively generate the profound dramatic tension and emotional depth that define this seminal narrative art song.

Within this work, the four dramatis personae—Narrator, Father, Son, and Erlkönig—are presented through an intricately woven and taut narrative structure. The Narrator functions as a detached observer and structural guide, employing a third-person perspective to meticulously delineate the scene while cultivating a palpably ominous atmosphere. This persona intervenes exclusively at the composition's inception and denouement, delivering laconic yet precise utterances that objectively frame the narrative while retaining expressive nuance. Serving as the foundational architecture of the entire work, the Narrator's measured and dispassionate vocal delivery establishes a dialectical

counterpoint to the subsequent characters' emotional turmoil, thereby grounding the Lied in profound affective substrate.

The Father, Son, and Erlkönig constitute the essential dramatic core of the narrative. The Father's discourse is permeated with affectively charged refrains—"mein Sohn" (my son) and "bleibe ruhig" (remain calm)—whose lexical recurrence manifests a sheltering presence. Each utterance embodies profound paternal solicitude and protective resolve, constructing a psychological sanctuary for the child. Confronting the Son's escalating terror, the Father initially deploys rationalist rhetoric and empirical explanations to quell the child's distress. However, as dramatic tension intensifies through the composition's teleological trajectory, his vocal demeanor undergoes a psychologically nuanced transformation: from assured composure to anxious vulnerability, culminating in desperate agitation. This affective metamorphosis is musically realized through carefully wrought melodic contouring, strategic harmonic shifts, and sophisticated vocal technique, enabling listeners to palpably experience the character's psychological disintegration.

The Son, this vulnerable and helpless character, anchors every utterance to "Vater" (Father)—the sole lifeline he clings to in despair, his psychological anchor and refuge. His cries, saturated with dependence and pleas for rescue, reveal profound fear, fragility, weakness, and helplessness, evoking a child lost in darkness desperately seeking guidance. Within his hallucinations, the Erlkönig looms as an ever-present shadow, relentlessly advancing with deceptively sweet yet lethal temptations and threats. This drives his three cries to progressively escalate in pitch, surging like relentless waves of dread that immerse listeners in visceral anguish for his fate.

The Erlkönig, this mysterious and dangerous character, crafts each utterance with honeyed sweetness that conceals lethal blades and sinister designs. Employing a gentle, alluring tone, he methodically lures the Son toward the abyss, intending to deliver death and fulfill his malevolent purpose. His lines—through cunning melodic construction, precise tonal selection, and distinctive vocal techniques—become irresistibly seductive, compelling involuntary immersion while retaining intrinsic threat and peril. Like a serpent in darkness poised to strike, he imbues the entire song with an aura of mystery and terror.

In summation, Schubert masterfully deploys the interplay of voice and piano, ingenious melodic and harmonic construction, and distinctive vocal techniques in Erlkönig. This approach not only delineates four vividly characterized personae but also generates gripping dramatic tension through their interwoven narratives and emotional conflicts. Consequently, this narrative art song stands as an enduring masterpiece in musical history, allowing listeners across generations to experience music's boundless power and profound significance.

2.2 Dramatic Context

The poem Erlkönig, an exemplar of interdisciplinary fusion between literature and music, traces its origins to Goethe's profound inspiration from and artistic re-creation of the Danish folk ballad Sir Oluf and the EIF-king's Daughter. Originally a musical embodiment of Nordic folklore, this ballad was meticulously translated and introduced to

the German-speaking world in 1739 by Goethe's confidant Herder, thereby furnishing Goethe with fertile cultural resources and creative stimuli[11].

Building upon this foundation with exceptional literary prowess, Goethe emulated its unique metrical framework to craft Erlkönig—a poem imbued with dramatic intensity and emotional profundity. Set against a storm-ridden night, the work depicts a father's harrowing encounter with the demonic Erlking while hastening homeward on horseback with his ailing son. Through distilled language and vivid imagery, it illuminates the profound paternal bond, the Erlking's sinister dread, and the child's tragic demise, thereby establishing a robust textual basis for subsequent musical interpretations.

Goethe's Erlkönig achieves its status as an ideal vehicle for musical composition through the organic synthesis of inherent musicality and poetic artistry. This fusion manifests across three dimensions—formal architecture, artistic expression, and creative praxis—collectively forging a symbiotic discourse between poetry and music.

From the perspective of form and structure, Goethe's poetry exhibits profound rhythmic integrity and metrical elegance. These qualities furnish musical composition with a natural framework and skeletal architecture. Each syllable and poetic line functions as a precisely calibrated phrasing, collectively weaving a movement of implicit musical tension. This unified rhythmic sensibility not only endows the verse with kinetic fluidity but also provides composers with fertile creative inspiration and structural scaffolding. Analogous to an architect first establishing a load-bearing framework before embellishing with ornamentation, Goethe's poetry offers music a foundation both structurally robust and flexible. Within this matrix, composers freely innovate, crafting musical realizations that honor the poem's essence while expressing distinctive artistic identities.

From the perspective of artistic expression, the fusion of poetry and music in Erlkönig achieves profound symbiosis. The poem's affective core—akin to a dancer's innermost passion—finds externalization through distilled language, while its rhythmic cadences and metrical patterns function as choreographic gestures that animate text with kinetic vitality. When these poetic elements converge with music, they grant the dancer aerial liberation, enabling transcendent artistic expression within imaginative realms. In Erlkönig, music not only extends and intensifies the poem's emotional resonance but excavates its subtextual strata. This mutually catalytic synergy constructs an artistic universe saturated with dramatic potency and expressive profundity.

From the standpoint of creative praxis, Goethe's profound mastery of the German language imbues his poetry with innate musicality. This sonorous quality permeates not only the verse's metrical design but every linguistic nuance, enabling composers to set it to music with intuitive fluency. The process resembles furnishing an exquisitely sculpted form with its essential pedestal—preserving the artwork's aesthetic integrity while granting it renewed vitality and meaning. Beethoven's assertion, "No poetry is more suitable for musical setting than Goethe's," constitutes both supreme recognition of the poet's musical essence and penetrating insight into the symbiotic alchemy of poetry and music.

This deeply integrated model of poetico-musical creation has not only generated numerous canonical Lieder but also established an enduring paradigm for subsequent musico-literary endeavors. It reveals that exemplary text-setting poetry must inherently

possess singability while preserving literary substance—existing as a "structurally complete yet musically anticipatory" entity awaiting the composer's craft to infuse it with ultimate musical realization. Such creative symbiosis underscores the interdependent dynamic between poetry and music, demanding multidimensional congruence in form, content, and affective resonance to achieve maximal artistic efficacy.

Goethe's poetic work Erlkönig, a crystallization of literary genius and musical sensibility, not only demonstrates the boundless potential of interdisciplinary convergence between poetry and music but also furnishes subsequent artistic creation with invaluable paradigms. It illuminates the transcendent artistic brilliance ignited when literature and music intersect, giving rise to profoundly moving masterworks of enduring power.

3 Musical Analysis

3.1 Structure

Schubert's art song Erlkönig exemplifies musical dramaturgy through its meticulously crafted multisectional architecture, unfolding a narrative of profound emotional intensity. The work's structural design masterfully segments the dramatic trajectory into five integrally connected phases: Prologue, Exposition, Development, Climax, and Denouement. This organization not only adheres to classical narrative conventions but also manifests Schubert's creative audacity and expressive depth as a preeminent Romantic master through nuanced compositional refinement.

Erlkönig's Prologue (measures 15-32) functions as a dramatic overture, establishing the work's mysterious and profound emotional foundation through its distinctive musical language and narrative technique. In ancient Greek drama, a prologue—often delivered by one or more characters before the main plot unfolds—briefly introduces the story's background or key events to enhance audience immersion. Schubert masterfully adapts this convention, crafting the prologue as an autonomous musical segment (mm.15-32). The Narrator's solemn utterance, "Who rides so late through night and wind? A father with his child clasped tight," simultaneously establishes the spatiotemporal setting—a storm-ridden night journey of a father carrying his ailing son homeward—and foreshadows the impending mortal struggle between love, fear, and supernatural forces.

Following the Prologue's conclusion, Schubert employs the second musical section (measures 35-54) as the narrative's Exposition, formally inaugurating this musical drama. Within this segment, melodic contours and rhythmic articulation vividly depict the father-son journey through the nocturnal landscape and their mounting disquiet. The piano accompaniment, through persistent octave bass lines and dissonant chord progressions, generates an atmosphere of palpable tension, foreshadowing imminent peril. Simultaneously, the vocal lines—via dialogue between Narrator and Father—reveal their profound emotional bond and the father's acute apprehension for his child's safety.

In the Development section (measures 57-112), Schubert propels the narrative toward its climactic culmination through the musico-dramatic architecture of the third through sixth segments. This portion showcases intensified compositional sophistication: melodic lines acquire sinuous complexity, harmonic language grows increasingly

audacious, and textural stratification deepens—collectively manifesting Schubert's profound mastery and inexhaustible inventiveness.

As father and son venture deeper into the forest's heart, the Erlkönig's spectral presence permeates the sonic fabric. Dissonant intervals proliferate like creeping shadows while abrupt modulations fracture tonal stability, acoustically embodying the encroaching malevolence and the protagonists' escalating terror. Simultaneously, Schubert constructs a realm of searing tension through the Father and Son's urgent exchanges—interlaced with the Erlkönig's alternating seductions and threats—thereby laying crucial psychological groundwork for the imminent climax.

The Climax (measures 116-131) constitutes the apotheosis of the entire work and the supreme manifestation of Schubert's creative and expressive powers. Centered on the Erlkönig's ultimate threat within the seventh musical segment, this passage propels the narrative to its zenith through stark rhythmic contrasts, precipitous melodic surges, and dense harmonic collisions. The Erlkönig's temptations and menaces intensify with visceral immediacy, while the father-son resistance escalates to its breaking point. Schubert harnesses musical language at its most potent to recreate the dramatic conflict and emotional ferocity of the text, plunging listeners into the storm-ridden night to experience its primal terror and despair with shattering immediacy.

In the Denouement (measures 132-147), Schubert deploys the eighth musical segment as the work's structural and emotional resolution. Through the Narrator's dispassionate delivery, the tragic outcome is revealed: "In seinen Armen das Kind war tot" (In his arms, the child was dead). Despite the devastating finale, Schubert contemplates mortality, paternal love, and transcendence through music of distilled solemnity. The piano accompaniment gradually recedes into stillness, its melodic lines softening into elegiac arcs that seem to intone a threnody for the lost life. The Narrator's closing utterance—"Und bist du nicht willig, so brauch ich Gewalt" (And if you're unwilling, I'll use force)—strikes with the searing finality of lightning cleaving the night, simultaneously concluding the narrative and imprinting its profound pathos upon the listener's psyche.

Schubert's art song Erlkönig achieves its status as a paradigm of musical drama through masterful multisectional architecture and profound affective expression, constructing a narrative of compelling emotional intensity. This work not only manifests the composer's preeminent artistry and artistic profundity but also offers invaluable insights for subsequent generations of musical creators.

3.2 Harmony and Fabric

When delving deeply into the harmonic language of Schubert's art song Erlkönig, it is readily apparent that Schubert demonstrates both a profound understanding and skillful application of the classical harmonic system in his compositional process, while simultaneously exhibiting bold breakthroughs and innovative attempts beyond traditional boundaries. This dual characteristic constitutes the unique charm and quintessence of the harmonic language in Erlkönig.

On the one hand, with supreme artistry, Schubert inherited the essence of the functional harmonic system of the Classical period, skillfully integrating the rigorous logic

and clear structure of traditional harmony into the work. Under his pen, clearly discernible traditional harmonic progressions, such as the cycle of primary triads I-IV-V, not only formed a solid tonal foundation for the music but also constructed a solid yet layered harmonic framework for the entire piece. These conventional harmonic frameworks, like contour lines carefully outlined by an artist, defined the overall direction of the music while providing essential structural support for its subsequent development. This ensured the song maintained internal unity and logic amidst its complex and ever-changing emotional expression.

On the other hand, Schubert was not content with merely inheriting classical harmony; instead, he boldly innovated and broke new ground upon that foundation. He understood that traditional harmonic language alone could not fully express the complex, shifting emotions and dramatic conflicts in Erlkönig. Therefore, he skillfully employed a series of meticulously crafted dissonant effects—such as modulation, non-chord tones, and pedal points—imbuing the music with rich color and tension. These dissonant elements, against the stable backdrop of classical harmony, function like finishing touches, heightening the atmosphere of extreme tension and unease. This allows the music to retain its harmonic beauty while simultaneously brimming with intense drama and expressiveness. Schubert's innovative attempts undoubtedly opened new expressive dimensions for musical composition, showcasing his extraordinary creativity and artistic boldness as a great composer.

Schubert's harmonic usage in Erlkönig demonstrates both a profound respect for and skillful inheritance of the classical harmonic system, while simultaneously showcasing his artistic spirit—daring to break tradition and courageously innovate. This perfect balance between traditional inheritance and innovative development not only endows Erlkönig with its unique artistic charm but also secures its place as an immortal classic in music history. Schubert's harmonic language, like that of a master colorist, paints thrilling musical landscapes through the interweaving of the classical and the innovative.

Schubert's art song Erlkönig stands as an immortal classic in music history, renowned for its exquisite texture and rich variety of piano accompaniment techniques. In this work, the piano accompaniment is not merely simple harmonic filling and rhythmic support; rather, through the skillful application of diverse textural techniques, it deeply participates in narrating the story, shaping the characters, and creating the emotional atmosphere. This fully demonstrates the profound emotion, individualized expression, and diverse timbral qualities inherent in Romantic music.

In the introduction of Erlkönig, the piano makes a striking entrance in the form of broken chords. A continuous stream of broken chord patterns, like flickering light in the night, gradually unfolds a hazy and mysterious atmosphere. This unique textural choice resembles the Erlkönig's footsteps stealthily descending through a dense forest at midnight, each step carrying an ominous sense of the unknown. It establishes the mysterious and tense tonal foundation for the entire song.

The use of broken chords here achieves multiple artistic effects. Aurally, the continuous broken chords break away from the monolithic presentation of traditional chords, creating a more fluid and agile sonic effect. Like the rustling of leaves stirred by a breeze in the forest, they evoke an elusive, ethereal mood. Symbolically, this texture

represents the Erlkönig's enigmatic emergence. It lacks forceful impact but subtly permeates the listener's senses, evoking deep-seated fear and curiosity towards the unknown. Simultaneously, the relatively steady and gentle rhythm of the broken chords contrasts sharply with the tense, intense rhythms that emerge in the subsequent narrative development. This further intensifies the mysterious atmosphere established in the introduction, laying the groundwork and foreshadowing for the unfolding story.

In the passages depicting the Narrator and the Father, the texture of the piano accompaniment undergoes a significant change, primarily consisting of clear and distinct chord progressions. These chords act like solid building blocks, providing stable rhythmic support and a harmonious harmonic background for the singer's narration. The clear and forceful chord progressions hold multifaceted artistic value.

In terms of rhythm, the steady chordal rhythm provides the vocalist with a reliable rhythmic reference, enabling them to more freely control the song's rhythmic flow and accurately convey the emotions and semantics within the lyrics. For instance, when the Narrator calmly recounts the story's background or the Father gently reassures the child, the steady rhythm of the piano chords acts like an imperceptible guide, allowing the listener to clearly perceive the progression of the narrative.

In terms of harmony, these chords add rich layers to the song. The color changes of different chords and the direction of the harmonic progressions skillfully enhance the emotional shifts conveyed by the vocalist. When the Father attempts to soothe the frightened child, the chords may adopt relatively warmer, brighter colors, conveying paternal care and resolve. Conversely, when the Narrator reveals tense plot developments, the harmony may shift towards more tense, unstable configurations, intensifying the dramatic effect of the music. This close coordination between harmony and singing imbues the song with greater expressive power and impact, allowing listeners to immerse themselves more deeply in the story's atmosphere.

As the plot progresses and the musical mood intensifies, in the passages depicting the Erlkönig, the texture of the piano accompaniment becomes intricate and richly varied, serving as a crucial means to portray the intense psychological struggle between the Erlkönig and the child. In this section, the piano not only traverses different registers from low to high, weaving diverse melodic lines, but also vividly depicts the tense confrontation between the Erlkönig and the child through the interweaving and contrast of these registers. The piano notes in the bass register resemble the Erlkönig's low, sinister growl, full of threat and enticement; while the melodies in the high register seem like the child's terrified cries and struggles, sharp and piercing. This stark register contrast vividly and powerfully conveys the psychological state of the confrontation—marked by a vast disparity in power yet intense struggle.

Complex textural techniques are also evident in the diversity of rhythm and harmony. The rhythm in the Erlkönig passages often becomes freer and more varied; irregular rhythmic patterns break conventional meter, creating a chaotic and unsettling atmosphere that symbolizes how the Erlkönig's presence shatters the original peace and order. Harmonically, the extensive use of dissonant chords further intensifies the music's tension and sense of conflict. These dissonant chords act like sharp thorns, pricking the listener's auditory nerves and making them profoundly feel the fear and threat brought by the Erlkönig.

This use of complex texture fully embodies the profound emotional expression and individualized style pursued by Romantic music. Through the rich variations in the piano accompaniment, Schubert subtly portrays the complex emotions of the Erlkönig's character—his evil, cunning—and the child's inner fear and helplessness. This allows listeners to intuitively sense the intense emotional conflict within the music, demonstrating the depth and breadth of emotional expression characteristic of Romanticism.

The diverse textural techniques employed in the piano accompaniment of Erlkönig—from the broken chords in the introduction, to the clear chords in the Narrator and Father passages, and finally to the complex textures in the Erlkönig sections—not only create a rich variety of emotional atmospheres and shape vivid, distinct characters, but also fully manifest the unique charm of Romantic music in emotional expression, individual style, musical form, and technical innovation. It stands as an exemplar of the perfect union of music and literature.

3.3 The Relationship between Music and Text

Within the system of rhyme schemes in German poetry, the couplet rhyme (Paarreim) is a relatively common form, structured as a a b b c c d d, meaning rhymes appear in consecutive pairs. Taking Goethe's *Erlkönig* as an example, the entire poem strictly adheres to this rhyme scheme, which imparted a unique rhythmic beauty and cadence to the poetry.

Wer reitet so spät durch Nacht und Wind?
Es ist The Vater mit seinem Kind;
Er hat den Knaben wohl in dem Arm,
Er faßt ihn sicher, er hält ihn warm.
Mein Sohn, was birgst du so bang dein Gesicht?
Siehs, Vater, du den *Erlkönig* nicht?
Den *Erlkönig* mit Kron' und Schweif ?
Mein Sohn, es ist ein Nebelstreif. [14]

Schubert, that shining star in the history of music, once said: "I stand on the shoulders of giants."[4]This statement profoundly reveals the relationship between inheritance and innovation in artistic creation, while also hinting at the close interdependence between music and literature. In the domain of art song composition, the lyrics, serving as the vehicle of emotion, are undeniably crucial. Schubert understood well that without excellent poetry as a foundation, exceptional musical works could scarcely be born. It was precisely based on this understanding that, in creating Erlkönig, he masterfully fused music and literature into perfect harmony, crafting such a classic work.

Erlkönig adopts the unique form of a through-composed song (durchkomponiertes Lied). The characteristic of a through-composed song lies in its avoidance of repeating identical musical sections; instead, it sets the entire poem to music in one continuous flow, responding to the emotional shifts and narrative development of the text. This form provided Schubert with broader creative freedom, enabling him to freely employ musical elements to interpret the poem's rich variety of emotions and events. In Erlkönig, Schubert uses the ingenious musical device of continuous triplets—like a magical

painter wielding notes as his brush—to meticulously depict the distinct perspectives, complex emotions, and vivid vocal inflections of the song's characters.

From a dramatic perspective, Erlkönig resembles a miniature musical drama where each character springs vividly to life through the music. The child, fading in his father's arms, seems to exhale frail, trembling breaths that reach the listener through the score. Schubert creates an atmosphere of weakness and helplessness through slowed rhythms, faint dynamics, and sparse accompaniment, evoking the child's pallid face and exhausted gaze. The anxious father's worry and fear are laid bare in the music: the melodic instability, urgent rhythms, and shifting dynamics reveal his inner turmoil. As he races forward while soothing his child, this emotional complexity is captured with precision. As for the sinister Erlkönig, his entrance sweeps through the scene like a dark whirlwind. Here, the continuous triplets become driving and forceful; their rhythmic impact, sudden dynamic surges, and eerie melodic contours render the Erlkönig's malevolence and threat with chilling intensity. These three characters intertwine and clash musically, creating seamless and monumental dramatic development that immerses the listener in a world both real and fantastical.

Schubert's ability to so vividly portray these characters and events lies in his masterful use of rhythmic and dynamic variations within the melody, coupled with changes in the accompaniment texture, to depict the scenes described in the poem. Melodically, the speed (tempo) and intensity (dynamics) of the rhythm directly influence the expression of emotion. For example, when depicting the child's worsening condition, the melodic rhythm becomes slow and heavy; each note seeming to bear the weight of the child's suffering and the fragility of life. Conversely, when the Erlkönig appears and tempts the child, the rhythm suddenly quickens, becoming urgent and tense, creating an atmosphere pervaded by danger. Variations in dynamics play an equally crucial role: soft dynamics can express the father's tenderness and care, while strong dynamics accentuate the Erlkönig's ferocity and menace.

The accompaniment texture also plays an indispensable role in Erlkönig. Across different narrative sections, the texture changes are rich and varied. During the Narrator's opening passages, the accompaniment texture is relatively simple and steady, primarily using broken chords to establish a mysterious and serene atmosphere, setting the stage for the story. When shifting to the Father and child sections, the accompaniment texture may incorporate flowing notes to simulate the sound of hoofbeats, enhancing the realism of the scene. In the passages featuring the Erlkönig, the accompaniment texture becomes complex and dense; dissonant chords and strong rhythmic clashes further intensify the portrayal of the Erlkönig's evil nature.

Take, for example, the Narrator's lyrics in Erlkönig: "Wer reitet so spät durch Nacht und Wind? Es ist der Vater mit seinem Kind; Er hat den Knaben wohl in dem Arm, Er faßt ihn sicher, er hält ihn warm." [4] These lyrics not only clearly mark the beginning of the song's story but also, through delicate description, reveal the father's deep love and urgent concern for his child's safety. When setting these lyrics to music, Schubert employs a gentle, flowing melody with a steady rhythm and moderate dynamics. The accompaniment texture is simple and warm, perfectly integrating the father's loving care into the music. Simultaneously, this foreshadows the father's later attempts to comfort his son, ensuring the story's emotional development flows naturally and seamlessly.

In Schubert's classic art song Erlkönig, through consummate and transcendent musical skill, he achieved a profound fusion and perfect unity of music and literature. He masterfully employed musical elements such as melodic contours, rhythmic tension and release, and harmonic color changes to construct vivid and lifelike sonic effects. These effects vividly recreate the scenes, characters, and plot of Goethe's original poem within the music, immersing listeners as if present within that mysterious and sinister night forest. Simultaneously, Schubert subtly conveyed the work's profound meaning through the musical language, allowing emotion to flow between the notes. This mode of creation, where music and literature are blended inseparably, not only fully demonstrates Schubert's unparalleled creative genius but also paved new paths for the composition of art songs in later generations, establishing a monumental exemplar of brilliance.

4 Conclusion

Among Schubert's vast and resplendent treasure trove of art songs, *Erlkönig* undoubtedly shines as the most brilliant and luminous classic gem. This work stands as an artistic monument, leaving an indelible mark on the river of music history with its unique artistic charm. It masterfully achieves a deep fusion of Classical and Romantic characteristics. Through profound and moving emotional expression, coupled with consummate and ingeniously crafted compositional technique, it vividly demonstrates the distinctive qualities of musical drama, becoming a significant chapter in music history.

Delving deeper at the textual level, the lyrics of *Erlkönig* are drawn from Goethe's poem of the same title. This poem possesses an exceptionally rich narrative quality, with a suspenseful and captivating plot, while also containing intense theatricality—like a miniature dramatic script—providing a solid and substantial literary foundation for the musical composition. The poem meticulously crafts three distinct and vividly realized characters: the Father, the Son, and the *Erlkönig*. The Father, embodiment of care and duty, cradles his gravely ill son as he anxiously rushes through the deep night; the Son, innocent yet engulfed in terror, shivers in his father's arms; the *Erlkönig*, sinister and cunning, attempts to lure the child towards the abyss. The interactions between these three roles and the development of the tense, thrilling plot endow the music with a vivid, captivating dramatic setting, enabling listeners to conjure an image full of tension even before hearing the music.

In the realm of musical creation, Schubert demonstrated extraordinary wisdom and creativity, skillfully integrating the formal structures of Classicism with the emotional expression of Romanticism. On one hand, he strictly adhered to the functional harmonic system of Classicism, carefully constructing a stable tonal foundation and a rigorous musical framework. This meticulous structure imbues the work with internal logic and unity, like a solid architectural frame providing stable support for the music's development. On the other hand, Schubert boldly employed Romantic techniques, such as richly varied dissonant chords—acting like sharp notes that disrupt traditional harmony, creating tense, uneasy atmospheres; fluid melodic lines, at times graceful and flowing, at others impassioned and surging, vividly conveying the characters' complex emotional worlds; and nuanced dynamic shifts, from gentle caresses to powerful impacts,

further enhancing the music's expressive power. These elements create an atmosphere of mystery, tension, and terror, immersing the listener as if present within the scene.

This study focuses on the classic work *Erlkönig*, conducting an in-depth analysis from multiple dimensions including text and music. Through meticulous interpretation of the lyrics' meaning, precise analysis of musical techniques, and exploration of their modes of fusion, it comprehensively and systematically presents the Classical and Romantic characteristics inherent in the work. Such research not only opens an effective pathway for delving deeper into Schubert's musical style, enabling us to grasp his creative philosophy and artistic pursuits more precisely, but also provides valuable material and profound insights for music enthusiasts and researchers seeking to understand and appreciate Classical and Romantic music. It aids us in navigating the vast ocean of musical art, appreciating its boundless charm.

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