A Pearl of Transformation

A New Look at W. A. Mozart's "Abendempfindung"

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with invaluable assistance from Fred Haight

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Foreword

My work on *Abendempfindung* began probably in the late 1990s. What had always sounded like a pleasantly melodic song to me, unexpectedly poked me when I sat down with a score to learn the keyboard part myself. That initial poke, by a perceived anomaly in the musical line, formed the basis of a thesis about the heart of the piece, which I have been determined to adequately elucidate ever since, as I shall attempt once again here. —*PSU*

"It's in the inversions."
– LHL to the author on Abendempfindung, early or mid-1999

ARCHITECTURE IS MUSIC IN THREE DIMENSIONS, said someone who apprehended an important commonality of the two arts. Neither should be viewed as merely a decorative playground, nor as a rigid structural objectification of rules. Both have the potential to inspire, to transform those whom they affect. We may be properly awed by the architectural coherence of Mozart's song; however, to comprehend what generated it, we must accept his implicit invitation, to view it as from the inside.

From the Pythagorean appreciation of the harmonic proportions of the human body as an expression of universal principle, leading European Renaissance figures, such as Filippo Brunelleschi, developed a new architecture, embodying the same concern for *living* proportion, that is, expressing the harmonic process of development recognized in living things and coherent with the revived view of Man as the highest expression of God's continuing creation, as exemplified by Nicolas of Cusa's successful argument for the *filioque* doctrine at the 1439 Council of Florence. Architecture, both religious and secular, and as sometimes closely regulated in city planning, as under the leadership of such as the Medici in Florence, played a major role in uplifting a population emerging from a dark age into a new age of discovery.

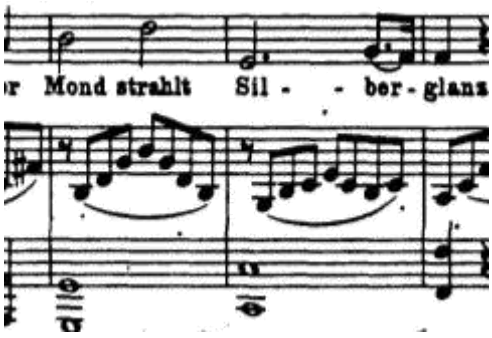
The thoughtful visitor to some of the great Gothic cathedrals of Europe (as well, to some secular buildings designed by great minds of the Renaissance) may be struck with the uncanny thought, that he or she is not standing in a huge, Euclidean space confined by the towering stone walls, but, rather, that somehow the place is a miracle, in which it was *the music of the space from which the building grew*, as articulated by the canonical procession of columns, the great phrasing of arches, and the organic proportion meeting the eye in every direction from every perspective.

Thus, whether experiencing the awe-inspiring scale of a cathedral, or the harmony of façades, colonnades, and rooms of secular buildings, that living proportion's music may resonate with us in a way that silently incorporates us into itself. What later degenerated, in discussion and practice of artistic composition, into a empty formal "appreciation" for "repeating forms" to harmonize a composition (before Modernist cultural terrorism glorified the wanton mutilation of harmony as its claim to originality), in the Classical school meant the opportunity for, and challenge to the artist, to represent in his or her forms the lawful process of harmonic development recognized in true creative thought, with all the ironies which the medium might suggest..

In Classical music, the musical "space" gives form to the composition; it is the idea-process, which generates and determines every moment of the piece lawfully, a process incomplete until the last measure comes to a close. In performing, it is the artist's comprehension of this, and ability to render it faithfully, which measures the success, weakness, or, perhaps, abject failure, of the effort.

Registering the Provocation

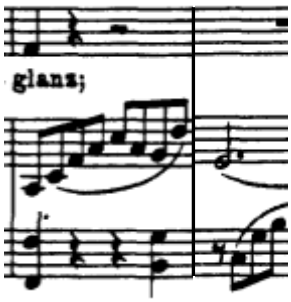
Mozart's much ignored ironic figure in *Abendempfindung* lies at the end of the second line, first sung in *strahlt Silberglanz,* which immediately then becomes transformed into a motivic refrain in the piano. Of all the choices that Mozart might have selected for silvery moonbeams, the singer, rather than gently descending from *strahlt,* drops a full minor-7th, from D' to E, across the register, before coming to rest, through a syncopated figure, on F, the tonic of the piece. (Remember this syncopated figure; we'll meet it again later.)



This might pass in pleasantry, but for the piano refrain. This refrain, then and throughout the piece, is almost unfailingly performed as if it were a "*passagio*," a mere background ornament ("Mozak," if you like) between the singer's lines.[1] Worse, the quickly played rising 5th/descending

[1] This is the case even in the otherwise surpassingly beautiful recording made by tenor Peter Schreier with pianist Andras Schiff (Decca, 1992).

7th brings to mind a certain Italian reference, but certainly not *bel canto*; the effect of the G-D'-E played unthinkingly, is singularly striking for anyone who has heard the complaint of a hungry Sicilian donkey. Did Mozart intend this, or has he offered us a very different musical idea?



With even a glance at the poem, we may discover a peculiar feature of the musical setting; for, while the poem is strictly strophic, with a regular rhyme scheme, six four-line verses rhyming A/B/A/B, and alternating five- and four-foot lines, Mozart organized his song quite differently. Indeed, his song is through-composed. Two measures in the piano introduce the poem's first two lines, followed by the above cited piano refrain. From there on, instead of making a unit with the second couplet of the stanza, we find ourselves in new territory, as it were, through not only the two lines competing the first stanza, but all the way through the next four stanzas. Then, however, Mozart introduces the final, sixth stanza with the same two introductory piano measures with which he opened the song. It might occur to us, that Mozart, by this separate treatment of the first two lines, and a return to an echo of their introduction just before the final stanza, has left an idea suspended for resolution. What might that be? Hardly anything has happened yet—or has it? The sun has set; the moon has risen, shining with silvery beams. Is this just "stage-setting," or integral to the central idea of the poem? Let us suspend judgement for the moment.

Think back to the irony of the singer's register-traversing minor-7th drop. Imagine that this creates two voices, the first of which hangs suspended on the D' (*strahlt*), to be resolved at some future point; the second, beginning on the E *(Silberglanz),* provisionally resolving to the F—an enhancement of the poem. For the singers, the registration is clear; but what about the piano motif? Perhaps, then, the two voices must therefore *be voiced* appropriately in the piano as well, or miss something perhaps crucial to Mozart's composition. (Notably, these first two lines, in the poem end in a semi-colon, while the musical setting suggests a period, especially given the change in tone beginning with the very next line, perhaps a reflection of this duality of suspension and resolution.)

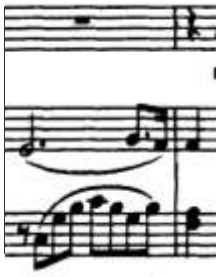
It does not serve us here to walk through this architecture, examining every detail in succession along the way. Since we are looking for the method by which the unity of the entire piece is achieved, we must first grasp what is being unified. For that, we now turn briefly to the poem, before proceeding with the musical setting.

We have spoken of the opening two lines. In the third, our mortality in general, and then the speaker's own, become the explicit subject, through the end of the third stanza, ending at *das Land der Ruh.* This plural and then singular form echoes in the two following stanzas, as the speaker addresses friends and then a beloved, particular individual. First, we—friends of the speaker—receive the promise of being wafted Heavenward by the departed's soul when we stand most mournful over his or her death; then, the beloved is asked to bestow a tear and gaze down gently on the departed in the grave.

In the final stanza, introduced with the echo of the piano's opening of the song, a single, temporal tear, consecrated to the memory of the speaker, is transformed, becoming an eternal silvery pearl—"the most beautiful pearl in my diadem." In that consecration, lies immortality.

Thus, this poem unifies the realm of our mortality, and its supersession through transformation to immortality through a sacred tear. What music can accomplish this? What development of architectural space can lead us through this process?

"Mozart, *begins* with motion and change," Fred has pointed out. In measure 1, A to C [in the piano right hand] is a descending major 6th, and the following B*b* to G is a mirrored ascending one. In the 2nd measure, "the descending A to C remains unchanged, but the ascending major 6th,

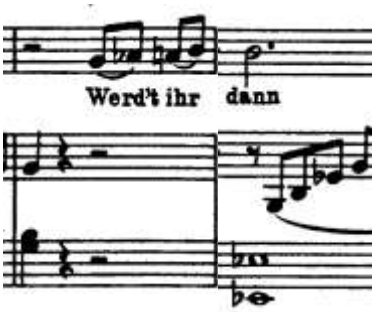


B*b* to G of measure 1, is now moved downwards to an ascending minor-6th, A to F. So, Mozart introduces an F-major triad, not as a self-evident starting point, of stability, but as something arrived at, by motion, and asymmetrical motion at that." Regarding the singer's minor-7th drop, "the minor 7th interval is also present in the bass voice [of the piano], which seems to answer the downwards minor-7th D to E, with an indirect upwards one between C and Bb."

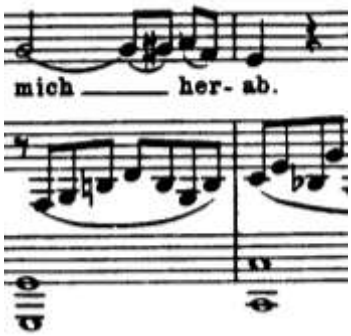
Ideas Organize Space

We observed earlier that Mozart had marked off the first two lines, returning again to the opening to introduce the final stanza. Let us take an overview of how he organized the space in-between.

Though we begin in a major (F) modality, with life's *schönste stunden* flying away, mortality is introduced with the Lydian (B-natural) by which we move into G-major in the second stanza, shifting into a minor modality, which continues through *das Land der Ruh,* ending in G-minor, defined by its minor third, B*b*. Thus, a space encompassing both B-natural and B*b*, bounds, here, the mortal and ephemeral.



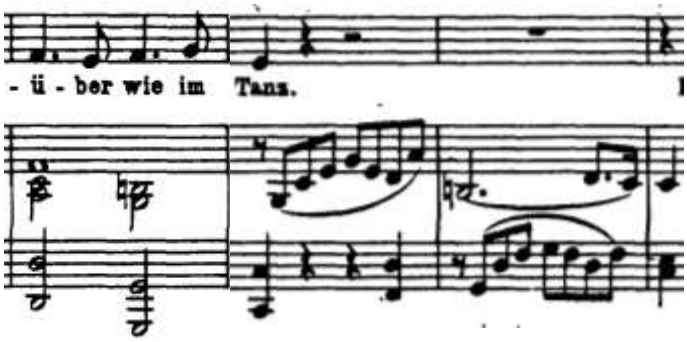
Stanzas 4 and 5, as we noted, comprise a sub-unit. It opens with a transformation of the G- minor in which we were left at the end of the third stanza: through the singer's solo, half-stepwise ascension from G to B*b*, the B*b* becomes the fifth of a new key, E*b*-major, when the piano enters.



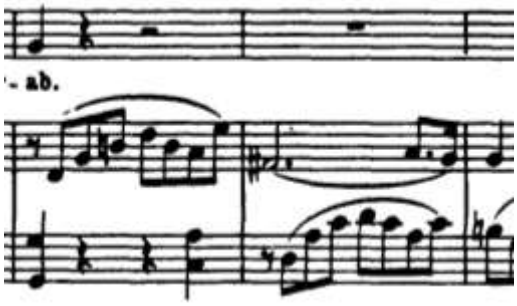
In this two-stanza space, we enter a more complex major-minor modality, with the half-step motion weaving throughout, even ending the singer's last line on an unresolved E, the leading tone of our F-major, to which we will shortly be returned.

Before proceeding to the final, transformative stanza, let us now re-trace our steps for a moment, to examine Mozart's work in this "in-between" section a little more closely.

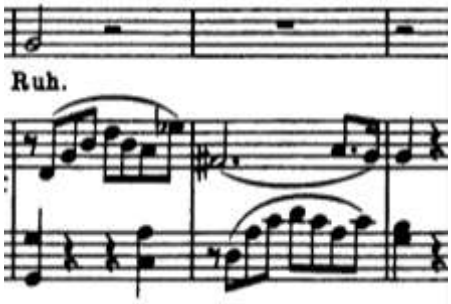
The motivic piano refrain that followed *Silberglanz* will return three times in this section, each different. The first instance comes after *wie im Tanz* and repeats the B-natural first introduced on *wie* in the piano.



The next follows *Vorhang rollt herab* and falls from E to F# in a G-major tonality.



The third one we do not hear until the very end of the third stanza, where it falls to F# again, but this time in G-minor, and the falling interval, now from E*b,* creates the greatest of dissonance, following *Land der Ruh*.



We heard this E in G-major, to E*b* in G-minor, earlier, in the uppermost piano voice's more compact change from *Aus ist unser Spiel* to *des Freundes Träne*. And, under *Aus ist,* Mozart directly transposed the 4-note piano figure from the first measure of the song.

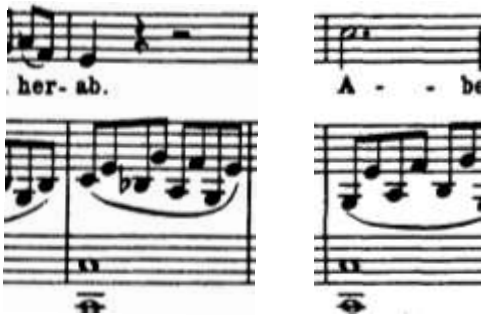
This irony—*das Land der Ruh* followed by the sharp dissonance of the piano refrain—which Mozart then follows with the half-step motion's transformation of the B*b,* from its minor-defining rôle, to participant in a major tonality, E*b*, to open the fourth stanza, bears also a transformation of the striking dissonance of the preceding E*b'* we had just heard in the piano refrain after *Land der Ruh* (E*b'* rising from A, a Lydian interval, compounded by the following F#).

In this fourth stanza, three other musical events ought to draw our attention. The singer's rising minor- 7th on *trauernd*, the first time the singer has sung this interval since opening the song, is an inversion, appropriately, of the falling 7th on *strahlt Silberglanz.* We hear something else for the first time since *Silberglanz*: the singer again sings the same syncopated figure, on *Himmel auch euch when.* Just afterward, for the first time for either voice or piano, the piano ascends, in response, into the fourth register, on G''.

In the fifth stanza, in which the speaker addresses a single, beloved person, Mozart realizes the new tonal space-time whose potential he created through the development up to this moment. A

scan of the score shows every significant tone and its "accidental"[2] alter ego playing an integral rôle (and even, at the last moment, on *mich herab*, a new tone, G#, the only one we will hear).

As the singer leaves off on the unresolved E of *herab*, the piano plays the exact inversion of its accompaniment to *Abend* at the song's opening, returning us to F major with the change from B to B*b*.



What an extraordinary realm we have entered! Step back to look over the score and reflect: We entered quietly in the musical space of F major. The *recognition of mortality*, we found, introduced the B-natural Lydian, but rather than confining us, this opened the door to a greater space, a combined C-major/minor domain of the related group of C-F-G, each in both major and minor, thus the new E*b,* F#, and A*b* which helped to shape our journey on the way to *das Land der Ruh.* With the transforming shift into E*b*-major at *Werd't ihr dann*, the multiply-connected richness grew again, adding C*b* as a new singularity. In the 5th stanza, again the space was enriched, and we added C# and G# to the singularities created by the music's development.

Yet, despite these transformations, we have said nothing yet about a resolution of the upper voice at the singer's line in the beginning. Let us now enter the final stanza.

A New Domain

Opening the final stanza, we hear a refrain of the piano's very first , two solo measures. In fact the song's opening accompaniment continues through the next five measures, as well, while singer's line, *Weih mir ein Träne, und ach, shame dich nur nicht, sie mir zu wein,* invents a variation on the poem's first line, within the same upper and lower limits, all in F-major. But this is a different, far richer F-major than the one that greeted us quietly and simply at the beginning of the song; and here the consecrated tear now becomes transformed:

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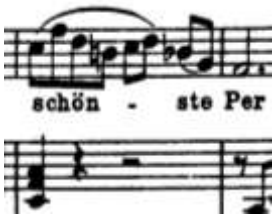
[2] I have for many years wondered if it was not someone like Paolo Sarpi who chose and promulgated this outrageously absurd and entirely misleading term.

Beginning with the first *o sie wird in meinem diademe*, we are carried by the singer up an octave, but through a rising Lydian, B-natural to F′, then pausing on D′, where Mozart creates a moment of silent suspension, before we descend back through B*b* into F major for *die schönste Perle sein*—now, the eternal, consecrated tear, transformed, comprises the two tonalities earlier bound in the temporal realm. Mozart is not finished: he repeats the first half of the line, adding in the major-defining third on A in the ascent, then has the singer combine the two tonalities even more integrally, in a single turn on *schönste*.



Still there is more: With a new repeat of *sie wird…*, now, for the first time, the high F is sung "from above" —the singer starts at the top, F′, drops a 6th to A, while the piano, in a parallel to the B-natural/B*b* motion above, brings in C# in a rising figure, a D-minor space, then returns, in *die schönste Perle*, to C-natural on the descent. (In another reflection of transformation, the piano figure following *sei wird* recalls that which we heard under *unser Grab* closing stanza two.) The singer leaves the line unresolved, but, for the first time since *Himmel auch euch wehn*, connects us back again, using the syncopated finish of *Silberglanz* for *Perle sein*. The final line is repeated one last time, this time, finally, with the same full minor-7th drop of *Silberglanz,* and, again, the syncopated figure on *Perle sein*. The piano repeats its original refrain, but then, soaring up an octave fully into the space only touched in the *Himmel* passage, make a crucial change in the refrain: the right hand, instead of dropping the 7th, descends only a 2nd, the inversion of the 7th, while the left hand plays two 6ths, inverting the order of the two in the opening measure of the song. The right hand, only then, drops down to the E, playing a figure which echoes *Himmel auch euch when*. Two final inversions, encapsulating this action, simply conclude the song.

Thus, it seems that Mozart did indeed, as a poetic idea drawn from the true subject of the poem, suspend the resolution of the upper voice at *strahlt*. Therefore, in performance, the piano must likewise voice this in response, in the refrain. The refrain changes, in keeping with the poetic development, and this as well *should have* the attention of the accompanist; its voices are never fully resolved until the fourth-register inversion in the postlude reflects the transformation of a sacred tear when our temporal sun has set.