Schumann was unique among the women of her time. She thought of herself as an artist first and as a woman and mother second.” (275)

Clara Schumann’s composition for Heinrich Heine’s poem, “Ich weiß nicht, was soll es bedeuten” for Robert Schumann’s thirty-seventh birthday in 1843, titled “Lorelei” belies a natural identification with Romantic thought. Susan Youens remarks on its exceptional similarity to the published work of Schubert, “Erlkönig”, stating, a “pervasive rhythmic figure is rendered somewhat gentler at times in both ballads to tell of flowing rivers or seductive blandishments, it is the percussive manifestations that are so shocking.” (239) Schubert is one of the most direct links between composers of the German Lied or art song and Romanticism in music. One of the most prominent reasons for this is identified by Lawrence Kramer in his chapter, “The Schubert Lied: Romantic Form and Romantic Consciousness”. Kramer offers, “The traditional way to explain why the Lied, in particular, should form the breakthrough genre is to observe that structural looseness and harmonic irregularity can be persuasively justified as expressions of a text.” (200) Kramer continues, “Schubert could support a Romantic style, as Schoenberg and Berg later supported an atonal one, on fluctuations of feeling enforced by poetry.” (200) His intention to represent such emotional movement in literature served as vehicle for a subject’s internal development to take shape according to external events in the work.  

Both compositions also use a sense of the otherworldly to shock and deliver messages of forbidden eroticism, while employing folk identities of potentially dangerous females at home within a realm of natural forces. Additionally, Youens notes Clara had a private connection to Schubert’s first opus, as she had performed “Erlkönig” – where the identity of the composer is expressed directly through the music, a relatively new Romantic concept in 1839 in Paris, which was also where she met Heinrich Heine for the first time after having already set some of his poems to her own music. Both composers seem to echo a personal creative need for departure from Classical restrictions, such as the interest of expected tonic-dominant resolution trajectories. Schumann uses a lack of any instrumental introduction with the piano at all in “Lorelei” instead relying upon the vocals to strand the listener in the midst of extreme lamentation. Consequently, Youens aptly remarks, “there is something wonderfully eerie about the fact that the rational “I” at the start of this initial declaration is given such short shrift,” while the emotional “I” who is so sad is prolonged on the downbeat of m. 3 to the first chromatic pitch of the song (the raised fourth scale degree C-sharp).” (253)

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