

German and Austrian Art Songs in the Romantic Period

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Abstract: German and Austrian art songs are the mainstream of art songs in the Romantic period and occupy a very important position in the whole European music history. In this paper, the author will elaborate on three broad aspects, namely, the background of the Romantic period, the origin and development of art songs and several specific composers, especially in terms of composers, and analyze and study Schubert, Schumann and Brahms, hoping to provide References: for readers who want to understand art songs.

Keywords: German-Austrian art song; Romantic period; Schubert; Schumann; Brahms

1. Background of the Romantic Period

Romanticism was a major spiritual movement in Europe around the 19th century, especially in literature and art.

Politically, many political events took place in Europe from the end of the 18th century to the beginning of the 19th century; the French Revolution of 1789 overthrew the feudal dictatorship in France for more than a thousand years, and the newly established bourgeois regime brought about even greater class oppression, making everyone disappointed with the Enlightenment “Kingdom of Reason”. The frequent revolutionary wars and wars of restoration of dynasties also provoked the awakening of national consciousness. Economically, as the industrial revolution progressed, capitalist industry and the factory system became widespread, the gap between the rich and the poor became obvious, and the working class was constantly oppressed, which led to the rise of the workers’ movement. Ideologically, German classical philosophy developed rapidly, exaggerating the subjective initiative of man and the human spirit. The birth of Marxism also gave impetus to the development of the socialist movement.

In this social context, literature and art began to focus on the expression of personal feelings and personal inner world, emphasizing freedom and randomness. During this period, a number of excellent Romantic writers emerged, such as Rousseau, Hugo and Shelley, whose works infected musicians and led to the collection of music and literature, and music thus transitioned to the Romantic era.

2. The Origin and Development of Art Songs

As an important genre in the history of European music, the process of creation and development of art songs has been extremely long. It is generally believed that art songs sprouted in the late 18th century and early 19th century, matured in the mid-19th century, and developed to the peak in the late 19th century. In fact, art songs first originated in the 8th century as “German lyric songs”, which were monophonic secular music sung in dialect and soon spread in Europe. In the 11th to 13th centuries, because of the chivalry of the Crusades, it was developed into “chivalric music”, and the content of the songs changed from country folk songs to songs of praise for the fatherland and love after it was introduced to France. With the Renaissance movement in the 15th century, polyphonic music was produced, and by the 16th century there were already polyphonic “lieder”, and in the 17th century it became “general bass”, which provided the necessary foundation for the “art song This provided the necessary conditions for the creation of the “art song”.

In the classical period, Mozart composed “Violet”, Beethoven composed “I Love You”, Haydn composed “Mermaid’s Song” and other art songs. Although their focus was not in the field of art songs, their contribution to the development of art songs cannot be denied. It was not until the Austrian composer Franz Schubert composed the song “Margarita at the Spinning Wheel” in 1814 that the first year of “art song” was really started.

From the original “German lyric song” to the final “art song”, it has gone through several centuries of changes.

3. German and Austrian “art song” musicians

3.1 Franz Schubert

Franz Schubert (1797-1828) was born in Austria, who inherited the style of Vienna classical music school, and was also the fore-runner and founder of the Romantic music school. In his short life, he composed a large amount of excellent music, with a wide range of works, rich in content and of great artistic value. In particular, he composed more than 600 art songs, and was therefore called the “father of art songs”.

Schubert’s compositional style is unique, with the elegance and freshness of classicalism and the delicate lyricism of romanticism, and he also incorporates Austrian folk music into his songs, in addition to finding the shadow of German folk music in his works. He paid great attention to the choice of lyrics, and most of his compositions were based on poems by famous poets such as Heine and Goethe. The piano accompaniment and the lyrics depend on each other, so that the melody perfectly fits the rhythm of the poems, and the two complement each other. His works are full of expectations and aspirations for a better life, with searing emotions and rich fantasies. Unlike some negative romanticism, which tries to cover up social contradictions or lead people to divert their attention, his works are brave enough to face the reality that is not as good as it should be, which is one of the reasons why Schubert’s music is loved by everyone.

Schubert composed art songs in various forms, including “Marguerite by the Spinning Wheel” and “To The Music” in the form of sectional songs, “Beautiful Mill Girl” and “Winter Journey” in the form of vocal suites, and “The Magician” and “Death and the Maiden” in the form of unison songs.

Schubert brought the German and Austrian art songs to the public, gave it a distinctive national color, and opened up a new path among many operas and foreign music, and Liszt evaluated him as “the most poetic musician ever”, and the influence he brought to later musicians was immeasurable.

3.2 Robert Schumann

Robert Schumann (1810-1856) was born in Germany. Since his father was a literary bookseller, Schumann was bathed in the world of literature from his childhood, and as a young man, he loved to write and was highly educated in literature. Growing up swimming in the world of literature, he possessed romantic fantasies, and his works are full of romanticism. Many of Schumann’s compositions are somewhat similar to autobiographies, inspired by his own love. He was married to his wife in 1840, and the inspiration derived from life and love led him to compose more than one hundred art songs that year. For example, his vocal suite “The Love Life of Women” resembles his love story with his wife Clara.

Schumann’s compositions are largely inherited from Schubert, but Schumann is more delicate than Schubert, and the emotions he expresses are more introspective and pure, with short and compact phrases, innovative harmonic techniques, alternating major and minor keys, and off-key techniques that obscure tonality, giving his works a hazy mood. Schumann attached great importance to the piano accompaniment, highlighting the piano in important moments of certain works, and in some art songs the piano accompaniment even tended to take the form of a solo piano piece. Schumann’s compositions have a great artistry and bring the art song to its second peak.

3.3 Johannes Brahms

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) was born in Hamburg, Germany. His father was a double-bass player at the Hamburg City Theatre and paid great attention to the musical education of his children, so he had a deep musical background. Brahms composed in the heyday of Romanticism, but his works are heavily classical, and he can be considered the most classical musician of the Romantic period. The collision of classicism and romanticism, and the development of Schubert and Schumann, led Brahms to develop a distinctive compositional style.

Brahms was very strict in his choice of words for his art songs, and “The Loneliness of the Fields” and “No Home, No Homeland” were chosen from the best poems of the same period. In addition to art songs, he also composed many other genres, such as children’s songs, folk dances, and so on.

Brahms’ compositions are also nationalistic, and he paid much attention to the exploration of folk music, using folk music elements in his compositions to give them a unique charm. While the music of the Romantic period was rich and complex, Brahms wrote classical, solemn, and quiet music with a quiet mind. Many of his works have a sentimental tone, such as the songs “Death in a Cold Night” and “Four Serious Songs”, which are typical of his works, with a sentimental tone.

Brahms was a master of classicism and romanticism, but he also drew from folk music and the works of Schubert and Schumann, and added his own philosophical thoughts to create a unique style of music, which has added to the development of German art songs.

4. Conclusion

In addition to the above musicians, there are composers such as Wolf, Mahler and Richard Strauss who have made great contributions to the development of art songs. Romanticism will always have a fascinating charm in the history of music, and the German and Austrian art songs in the Romanticism period are the bright pearls that cannot be ignored.

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