

Among the more than six hundred songs Franz Schubert wrote in his short life, vast in their range of moods and musical forms, are a considerable number on Greek themes, drawn from the poetry of both greater and lesser German poets. A recent writer has gone so far as to speak of “Schubert’s Greek revival” (M. W. Hirsch, *Romantic Lieder and the Search for a Lost Paradise*, Cambridge 2007). Within this body of “Greek Lieder,” the range of subjects and tones is remarkable, from the sublime stillness and wonder of “Lied eines Schiffers an die Dioskuren” to the stunning intensity of despair in “Gruppe aus dem Tartarus.” In this paper I will discuss a group of Schubert songs whose texts deal with individual heroes and elicit from the composer a particularly powerful musical response.

Like the rest of Schubert’s Greek *Lieder*, these heroic songs mediate Greek myth and thought through the filter of German Romantic poetry. They include settings of Goethe’s *Sturm und Drang* poems “Prometheus” and “An Schwager Kronos,” Schiller’s “Hektors Abschied,” Heine’s “Der Atlas,” and several poems by Schubert’s friend Johann Baptist Mayrhofer, among them “Iphigenie,” “Orest auf Tauris,” “Der entsühnte Orest,” “Philoktet,” “Memnon,” and “Atys.” We are dealing, then, with Schubert’s musical interpretation of his poets’ adaptations of Greek mythology, religious sensibility, and philosophical and political ideas. This is of course typical of the workings of classical reception, but it is useful to clarify what that means in a specific case of such concentrated expressivity. Schubert’s songs are, after all, not only interpretations of Greek culture as mediated by German poetry, but statements made in the composer’s own time and place to his contemporaries, and to us.

Often highly declamatory in style, these songs emphasize the strivings of the great individual, the exaltation of freedom or lamentation of its loss, and the suffering that comes with great struggle. An analysis of two songs will illustrate some of the ways in which Schubert’s music underlines such themes, deepening their meaning and heightening their emotional impact. Schubert’s “Der Atlas,” one of the late Heine songs collected posthumously in the collection known as “Schwanengesang” (Swan song), makes this Titan a figure of human misery—presumably (as so often with Heine) that of unrequited love, but Schubert’s music redeems the somewhat hyperbolic conceit of the heart-broken lover as an Atlas carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders with a musical setting of dramatic, almost operatic intensity. The second is a setting of Goethe’s “Prometheus,” a poem of the 1770s that Schubert set nearly half a century later in majestic musical declamation that actually heightens the contemptuous tone toward authority expressed by Goethe’s Titan. In the repressed atmosphere of Metternich’s Vienna, this assertion of defiance must have made a striking and unsettling effect. It is still powerful today.