

# ON AUDEN'S ICARUS IN SCHUBERT

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W. H. Auden, in his poem “Musée de Beaux Arts,”<sup>[1]</sup> writes how *the Old Masters understood suffering* as exemplified in a specific painting (Pieter Bruegel, the Elder, *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*) and in descriptions of things that could be paintings from the Dutch Golden Age. Auden shows how these painters were able to depict suffering, and one might also add tragedy to this (that is, a tragic event) in the way that it somehow happens while the rest of the world is simply busy doing its own thing. No matter how large or personal the tragedy is, the picture Auden has in mind has the ability to transform how we understand tragedy as something all encompassing—a suffering that seems to take over our entire being—while our neighbors, friends, and others in the community go about their business like any other day.

Franz Schubert's Sonata in A Minor (D. 845) depicts a similar sentiment, although it is the reverse (or maybe not, depending on how one reads Auden's first stanza). The outer movements of the sonata do this particularly well, but we will focus on the first movement for the sake of clarity. At a first listen to the sonata, the first motif of the exposition sounds, quite frankly, strange. It is a short little

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theme, just about two bars, that resembles a folksong or rustic melody. This arises most likely from the modal element therein because it doesn't quite establish its home key until the fourth bar, at the conclusion of the second motif. (The first motif outlines an A minor chord, but even so it does not sound like A minor.) Thus, it wavers between a mixolydian and aeolian sound until the conclusion of the ritardando. The sonata starts very quietly with few elements, which accentuates the form of the first motif. The slowing up of the second motif, the counterpart of the first, at the very beginning of a movement, is also unusual and speaks to the whole of the movement as the tempo does not seem settled, not even by the third bar.



Figure 1. Franz Schubert. Sonata in A Minor (D. 845), I/[0]-4.

The listener fixates on the folksong-like melody, full of pathos in its singular notes moving one-by-one. The theme mirrored in octaves in this way, at the very start of everything, sets what is recognized as a “tragic theme” for its minor tone and the bareness which makes it as clean and seamless as ice without the interference of birdsong or the sounds of the ploughing of fields. It is not empathetic, resembling a sigh or plaintive whimper, but more of a remembrance, or a lived-suffering retold. This overall tone returns again and again, not only because sonata form dictates this, but also because Schubert weaves the first motif, independently from its answer in the second motif, to push this odd sonority to the forefront of our musical memory.

The suffering motif and tragic element of the sonata are difficult to avoid simply because of their consistent presence. Moreover, the tragic element of the sonata is generally placed firmly on its intrinsic link to Schubert's

lied, *Totengräbers Heimwehe* [Gravedigger's Lament], D. 842,<sup>[2]</sup> as Schubert reuses musical material from the lied. In fact, this material is a variation on the first motif, in octaves, and ornamented, which makes it so recognizable in its quotation.

Nevertheless, Schubert combats the simplicity of the tragic upon the ear through passages in the major mode and carefully placed cadential moments in the first movement. These brief instances carry expression away from that depth of pathos. These sections of respite, moreover, are brief scenes of joy that feel closer to something miraculous than something that is harmonically necessary.

This is where we turn to Auden, again; if suffering is overwhelming for the one who is experiencing it, it is, at the same time, something that is hidden away, a moment of great significance that seems of little value to others who are too distracted by their own lives. The moment of reflection, which pulls humanity up from the rubble, forces us to come to terms with our existence rather than abjure former hopes of recognition; it is when we realize that there are in fact tragedies that go beyond the scope of our own experience and even what we might be able to comprehend. This more perfect suffering or tragedy, nevertheless, still seems to go on in a corner, tucked away. If we want to say that Schubert's sonata portrays a sense of the tragic that is the everyday, shared, and almost base or ignoble experience, the central motifs of the sonata finely illustrate this almost to the point of exhaustion. When the truly tragic lies in reflection upon an object of art that articulates a suffering that is much greater than ourselves, and yet we can still somehow find tenuous ligatures to our experience, it is one that also gives us the space to luxuriate in that.

The image shows a musical score for Schubert's Sonata in B-flat major, D. 842. The score is presented in two systems. The first system, starting at measure 68, shows a piano part with a melodic line in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. The second system, starting at measure 74, continues the piano part with a more rhythmic bass line and a melodic line in the right hand. Dynamics include *mf*, *p*, and *cresc.* The tempo marking is *molto espressivo*.

Figure 2. Franz Schubert. Sonata in A Minor (D. 845), I/68-80. (In Badura-Skoda's recording, as Clara Haskil's, this section appears at 1:54-1:58. Time indications reflect their appearance in the recordings, respectively.)

The image shows a musical score for Franz Schubert's Sonata in A Minor, measures 228-235. The score is in A minor and 3/4 time. It features a piano part with sustained chords and a vocal line with a melodic motif. Dynamics include *f*, *molto espress.*, *p*, and *pp*.

Figure 3. Franz Schubert. Sonata in A Minor (D. 845), I/228-241. (5:55-6:00).

This space for reflection in Schubert's sonata is contained in sustained chords that form a cadential passage, which serve as transitions to different sections within the greater divisions of sonata form. In both of these figures outlined above, we see two chords which have the same rhythmic value. These simple cadential figures merely ask for resolution. In both of the cases above, these cadences resolve in major. Schubert takes, in these sequences, the tragic motif that opened the sonata, passes it through great expression with the *molto espressivo* indications, and then suddenly concludes all of this at a quiet *piano* level without any complexity. The cadence, as it inclines towards resolution, is so much out of the way that it hardly resounds over the memory of the tragic motif. In both cases, the modulation into major is played at even softer levels. It would seem intuitive that moments of pathos would be played at quieter levels than moments of exuberance, but Schubert turns this logic on its head. In this movement of the sonata, it is in these cadential sequences that there are the longest sustained notes in both hands at the same time without the interference of motivic elements.

The import of this cadential sonority in the whole is rather weak, despite appearing in this form a few times; it is not characteristic in the sense that we recognize the shared material across the sonata with *Totengräbers Heimwehe*, which, if the listener is familiar with the song, will find an

even darker and pathetic dimension of the tragic. But these short cadential passages seem to speak to another meaning, pointing beyond the tragic while maintaining a bond to it. Here is where we can reflect at peace upon what is somehow perfectly tragic and overcome an obsession with suffering in our own lives, and thus assuage the tug of the *Totengräbers Heimwehe* upon any conclusion of meaning.



Figure 4. Franz Schubert. Sonata in A Minor (D. 845), I/97-109; 2:38-2:42 (Haskil); 2:41-2:45 (Badura-Skoda).

In Figure 4, a moment in the development section, the cadence does not resolve in major after an extended passage of a variation on the first motif played in octaves. This cadence is the first time in this section that we finally do not hear the moving parts of the *Totengräbers Heimwehe* material; and, perhaps unsurprisingly, this cadence resolves in D minor. It is here that we learn that this cadence does not always mean major; it might be that at this instance, the tragic motif overwhelms the cadence in all respects and overpowers our ability to reflect at a distance. Thus, resolution does not necessarily have to lean towards the positive.

The cadences discussed here when seen in this light, and listened for with precision, may sound as though they signal the conclusion of a narrative. These two bars are almost like looking at the specific moments of suffering, of tragic miracles, that Auden describes; and our attention focuses on these moments despite the fact that more complex things are happening all around them. One wonders if the point that Schubert wanted to make on the tragic is not greatly assisted through the connection to *Totengräbers Heimwehe*, at the same time as one wonders whether looking at Bruegel's *Landscape with the Fall of*

*Icarus* takes away from Auden's point. It seems quite obvious that Schubert was very interested in the first motif of the sonata, as it dominates the work, mirrored in octaves without harmonization. Yet what captures our interest is not that. It is rather that small detail, an elementary cadence that is foundational of Western music that is no more Schubert than any other composer since the Baroque era. It is how that element is used, how it is placed away from the focus so that its significance in the landscape surreptitiously makes itself known. It appears before the mind through gentle accumulation as the object of reflection and helps us to question what suffering, what the tragic, really is.

[1] See <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/159364/musee-des-beaux-arts-63a1efde036cd>. The poem only has two stanzas; the second begins with "In Brueghel's Icarus."

[2] Third verse, at 2:34-2:40 in recording below.

## Recordings

Franz Schubert, "Sonata in A Minor (D. 845)" on *Schubert: Piano Sonatas D. 959, D. 960, D. 664, D. 845 & D. 850*, Paul Badura-Skoda, RCA.

Franz Schubert, "Sonata in A Minor (D. 845)" on *Mozart / Beethoven / Schumann / Schubert – Récital 7/9/56 Festival de Besançon*, Clara Haskil, INA, Mémoire Vive – IMV042 (CD reissue).

Franz Schubert, "Totengräbers Heimwehe (D.842)" on *Franz Schubert: Lieder (Orfeo d'Or, Salzburger Festspieldokumente)*, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and Sviatoslav Richter, Orfeo, C334931.