From Transcription to Musical Topic: ‘Wordless Song’ in the Piano Works of Ludwig van Beethoven and Early Romantics*

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ABSTRACT – With his famous statement: „*Alles muss gehörig singen*” [“Everything must sing properly”] in *Der volkommene Capellmeister* [*The Perfect Chapelmaster*] of 1739, Johann Mattheson summed up the rules of all musical composition, be it instrumental or vocal. The implication that some “vocal” element is (or should be) omnipresent in all instrumental music makes it difficult to distinguish musical topics or characters of typically vocal provenance in an instrumental piece. This issue has also been discussed by modern semioticians – Raymond Monelle says: “Music is already song before any text is added”. Sarah Day-O’Connell adds: „The singing style [in the instrumental music] means so many things that it risks meaning nothing”. If – following these statements – “all music is a song”, is the notion of a ‘Wordless Song’ in the instrumental music still relevant, unless such idea was clearly indicated in the title, as in the works of Felix Mendelssohn (*Lieder ohne Worte*), Peter Tchaikovsky (*Chants sans paroles*), Gabriel Fauré *(Romances sans paroles*), to give but a few examples? In order to take a closer look onto what could be defined as an instrumental ‘song without words’, it is worth looking at musical pieces that became wordless simply by the act of removing the verbal layer and became instrumental transcriptions, or the instrumental ones, in case of which more or less successful attempts were made to add poetic text. In both cases following features can be distinguished: melody range similar to that of a human voice, a texture that implies the presence of a vocal line (resembling a vocal transcription), a regular metric structure imitating that of a poem set to music.
Keywords: topic theory, musical arrangement, 19th-century piano music, art song, Ludwig van Beethoven.

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Schläft ein Lied in allen Dingen	A song sleeps in all things,
Die da träumen fort und fort	Which dream on and on,
Und die Welt hebt an zu singen	And the world begins to sing,
Triffst du nur das Zauberwort	If only you find the magic word

(Joseph von Eichendorff)

1. Introduction

The lines taken from Eichendorff's poem, which open the introductory chapter of Marcin Trzęsiok's study on the music and aesthetics of the early German Romanticism, imply that the term 'song' can be understood in an universal way – basically it stands for any musical activity. Indeed, decades before what we call the Romantic period, Johann Mattheson summed up the rules of all musical composition – be it instrumental or vocal – with his famous statement: "*Alles muss gehörig singen*"[1] ["Everything must sing properly"] in *Der volkommene Capellmeister* [*The Perfect Chapelmaster*] of 1739. The assumption that some vocal element is (or should be) omnipresent in all instrumental music makes it difficult to distinguish any objective features revealing typically vocal provenance of – or within – an instrumental piece. Raymond Monelle says: "Music is already song before any text is added"[2]. Sarah Day-O'Connell adds: "The singing style [in the instrumental music] means so many things that it risks meaning nothing"[3]. As Hartmut Krones claims, even Beethoven, whose piano works are the point of departure for my analysis here, "remained unequivocally rooted in that old tradition which saw any musical activity as 'singing'[4], and all musical instruments – as imitators of the singing art"[5]. Since there is no greater inhibition factor in musicological research than the danger of a meaningless debate, it seems that the best idea is to leave it as it is. However, some musical genres, topics, or textural solutions found in the instrumental music can be perceived as more vocal or 'song-like' than the others, especially since they became increasingly distinguishable towards the beginning of the nineteenth century, which can be called 'the age of art song' on one hand, and the age of specifically instrumental virtuosity on the other.

Most generally, a song is usually defined as "a piece of music and lyrics – in which one has been adapted to the other, or both to one another – designed for a singing

1 Mattheson, *Der vollkommene Capellmeister*, 2.

2 Monelle, *The Sense of Music…*, 8.

3 Day-O'Connell, "Singing Style", 238.

4 Schubart, *Ideen einer Ästhetik der Tonkunst*, 335.

5 Krones, "Von der Beethoven'schen Redekunst am Pianoforte…", 95.

performance"[6]. In this context, the term 'Wordless Song' used in topic theory, sounds oxymoronic. However, these "two inseparable sisters"[7] – music and poetry – which are believed to be immersed in one another since the age of Antiquity, do not always adjoin each other in a musical work. The list below displays four possible combinations of their interaction:

1. Sung + Texted = SONG (accompanied melody with poetic text);
2. Unsung + Texted = MELODRAMA (accompanied speech, can also be set in prosa);
3. Sung + Wordless = VOCALISE / MELISMA (an accompanied melody sung by human voice but without the text);
4. Unsung + Wordless = ABSOLUTE MUSIC (no human voice, no text, only instrumental piece).

Yet even in the case of the absolute music, in which neither human voice nor the text plays any role, the instrumental piece can still be a song, or more precisely, it can still show some obvious elements of vocal provenance – "the worded nature of music may affect the musical surface, but in an unworded way"[8]. Christopher Gibbs, who wrote a contribution to *The Cambridge Companion to Lied*, dealing with the extension of the Romantic *Lied* outside the confines of the genre, points to two basic examples of inclusion of the song into the instrumental nineteenth-century repertoire[9]:

1. 'unsung song'
    a. literal (i. e. instrumental arrangement of an actual song);
    b. figurative (*Lieder ohne Worte* – an instrumental genre, based on formal and textural patterns of a song);
2. 'subsumed song' (i. e., song material used within an instrumental work).

In this take on the subject, three musical phenomena belonging to the category of 'unsung song' are discussed, which are closely related to each other by the fact of transposing song-like texture into piano music, here listed from the most to the least evident:

6 Franzon, "Choices in Song Translation", 376, cf. also Gorlée, "Grieg's Swan Songs" and *Song and Significance…*

7 Herder, *Viertes kritische Wäldchen*, 364.

8 Monelle, *The Sense of Music*, 9.

9 Gibbs, "Beyond Song…", 224-228.

- An instrumental (piano) song transcription ('literal unsung song') – an original song for voice and piano, which became exclusively instrumental through adaptation made by the arranger (e. g. Liszt, Thalberg or others);
- A 'song without words' ('figurative unsung song') a whole piece of music originally conceived as instrumental, but with reference to the idea of the song genre, in which the composer's intentions are clearly signaled in the title: Mendelssohn – *Lieder ohne Worte* (1829-1845), Sigismond Thalberg – *Romances sans paroles* (1839), Henryk Wieniawski – *Romance sans paroles et Rondo élégant* op. 9 (1852), Peter Tchaikovsky – *Chants sans paroles* (1867), Gabriel Fauré – *Romances sans paroles* (1878);
- 'Wordless Song' – an element of typically song-like texture or formal pattern, used locally in an instrumental piece, which can be recognized only through semiotic analysis; e. g. a *topic* ('Wordless Song'[10]), *genre pieśniowy* ('song genre')[11], 'Lied-Charakter' – Constantin Floros[12].

2. Turning the Vocal into Instrumental: A Brief History of Transcriptions

To quote Gibbs, "it would seem that the practice of taking something vocal and rendering it instrumental is nearly as old as Western music itself"[13]. Indeed, the idea of enlargement of the instrumental repertoire through arrangements of vocal pieces dates back at least to the age of late medieval period. As for keyboard arrangements, probably the earliest we know about were made for virginal (e. g., by William Byrd and John Bull), harpsichord (e. g., Jean-Henri D'Anglebert – harpsichord arrangements of songs along with some excerpts from Jean Baptiste Lully's operas) or organ (e. g., Johann Sebastian Bach's *Schübler Chorales* for organ, modelled on fragments taken from his earlier cantatas). Thanks to the development of pianoforte in the eighteenth century, new opportunities emerged, which resulted in an eruption of transcriptions dedicated to the newly invented instrument.

Apparently, the artistic piano transcription has its immediate predecessor in the practice of piano reductions of both vocal and instrumental scores, which gained popularity already in the eighteenth century. As Hartmut Kinzler writes: "through this

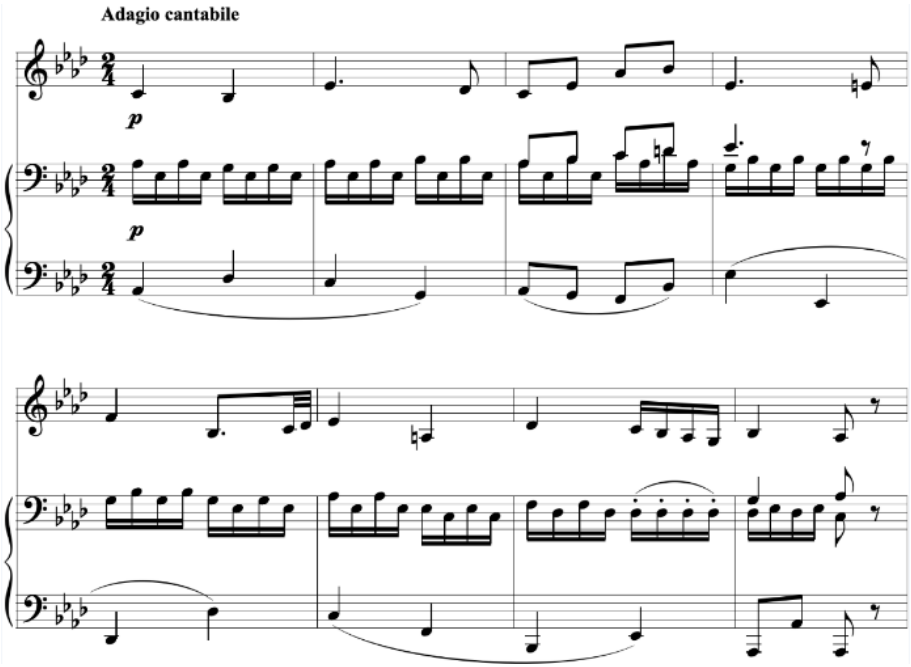
10 Monelle, *The Sense of Music*, 8-9.

11 Not to be confused with the general understanding of the term used to describe musical genre. See: Tomaszewski, *Chopin. Człowiek – Dzieło – Rezonans*, 645.

12 Floros, *Mahler und die Symphonik des 19. Jahrhunderts in neuer Deutung…*, 130-134.

13 Gibbs, "Beyond Song", 224.

kind of transcriptions, one could get acquainted with the original at least in an acoustic form: that is, not only through reading the notes, although still in a reduced version of some sort, comparable to a black and white reproduction of a full-colour painting"[14].

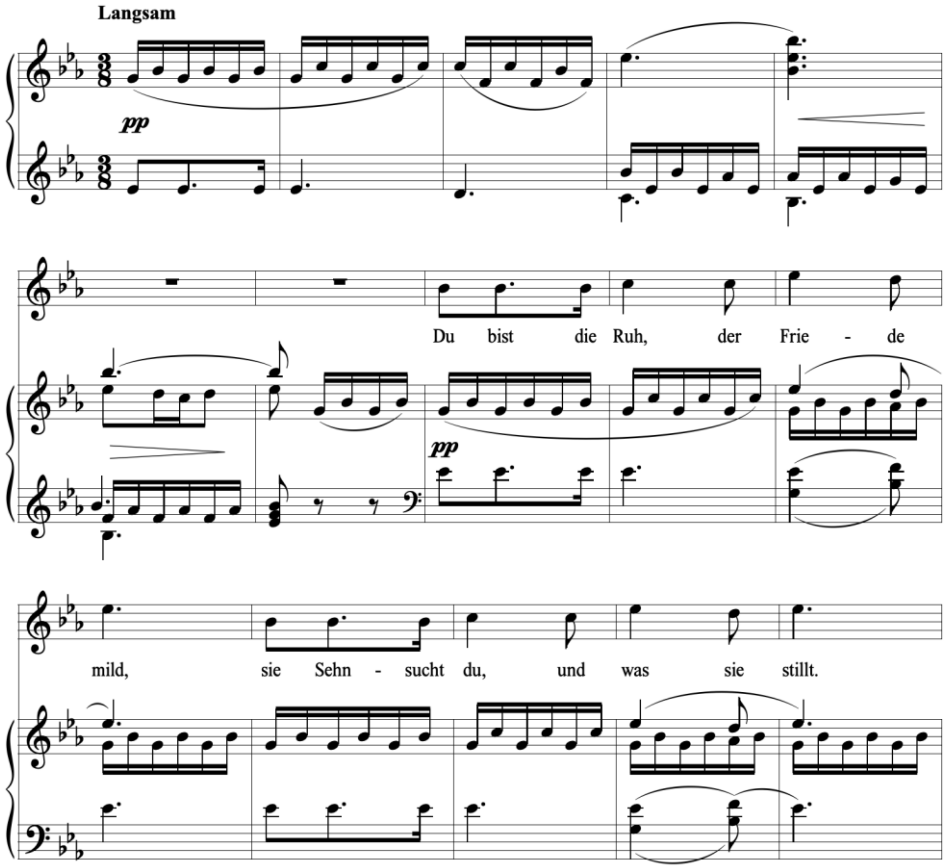


Ex. 1a. Ludwig van Beethoven, *Piano Sonata* in C minor op. 13, '*Pathétique'*, 2nd movement, opening bars.

It seems, however, that the idea of using a song-like texture in piano music was conceived decades before real piano transcriptions of songs appeared in the first half of the nineteenth century. There seems to be a variety of explanations to this: firstly, in the case of many eighteenth-century songs there was no need of an actual transcription – the vocal line was often doubled by the right hand of the piano accompaniment. Secondly, the expansion and improvement of piano technique and sound quality of the instrument itself, allowed more complicated score reduction strategies, including a transcription of a song originally written for voice and piano. But a sense of an aesthetic necessity to make piano sing, and to transcribe songs for piano solo, at least in a way J. S. Bach did with his

14 Kinzler, "Liederkreis ohne Worte…", 488. Own translation.

chorales, had certainly been there long before composers such as Czerny, Liszt, Thalberg or others, began to write actual piano transcriptions of songs.

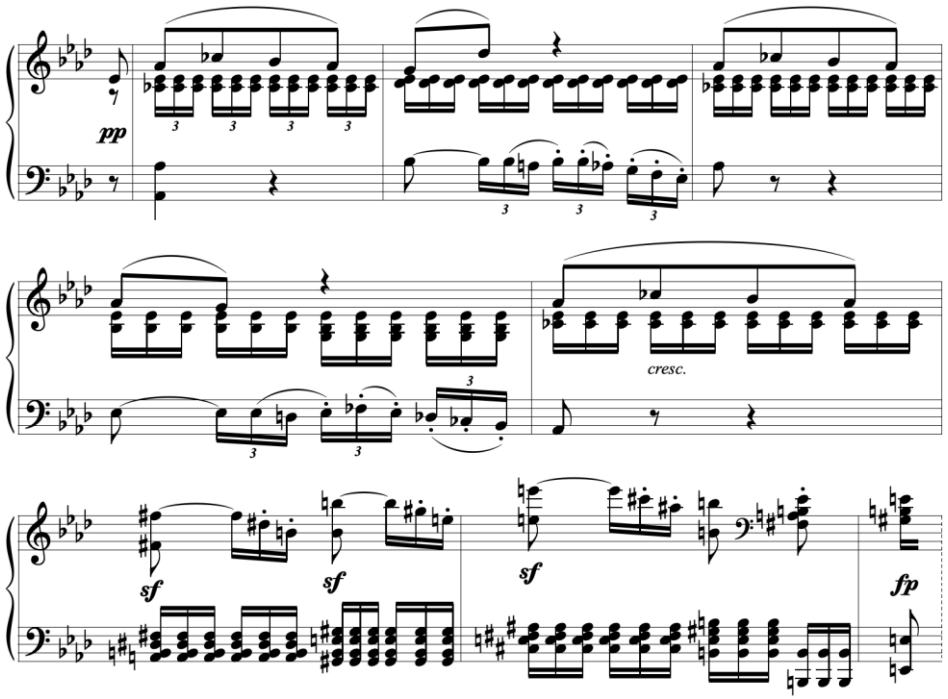


Ex. 1b. Franz Schubert, *Du bist die Ruh*, D 776, opening bars.

Interestingly, what we call here a musical topic, genre, or character of a 'Wordless Song' here, significantly preceded both the appearance of actual song transcriptions for piano, which were in blossom in the 1830's and even the creation of the first series of Mendelssohn's *Lieder ohne Worte* (1829). Some examples of piano texture, resembling transcriptions of songs, can be traced already in Beethoven's early piano sonatas, written around 1800. The opening bars of the famous *Adagio* from the *Sonata 'Pathétique'*

op. 13, when transcribed for an imaginary voice and piano, have a song-like texture similar to Schubert's *Du bist die Ruh* (Ex. 1a and 1b).

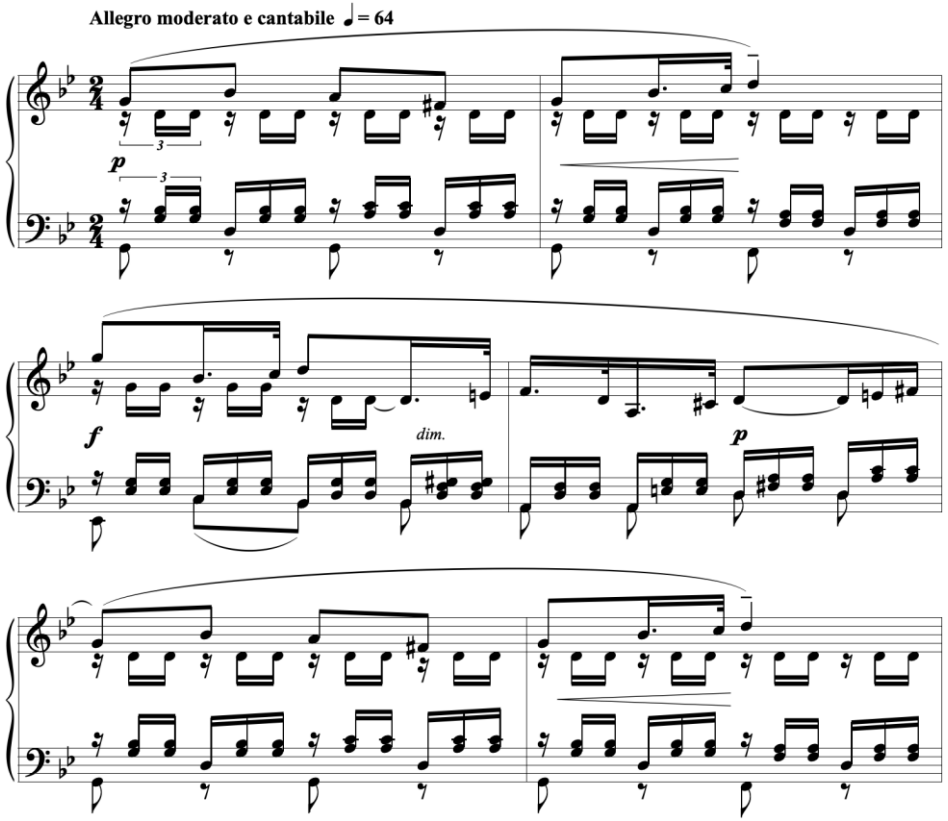
The middle section in A-flat minor, on the other hand, resembles the texture used in one of the *Etudes* by Ludwig Berger (1819), a piece which Robert Schumann later described as an early antecedent of Mendelssohn's *Lieder ohne Worte*: "Indeed, I can find a quite proper 'song without words' in the charming, melancholic G minor Etude by Ludwig Berger, the teacher of Mendelssohn and Taubert, but it was Mendelssohn who gave the genre a name, and Taubert carried it out in yet another way"[15].



Ex. 2a. Ludwig van Beethoven, *Piano Sonata* in C minor op. 13, '*Pathetique'* 2nd movement, bars 37ff.

15 Schumann, *Gesammelte Schriften über Musik und Musiker*, 168. Own translation.

The triplets in the low and middle register ('piano accompaniment') and a similar phrasing in the melody ('voice') bring these two pieces surprisingly close to one another[16] (Ex. 2a and 2b).



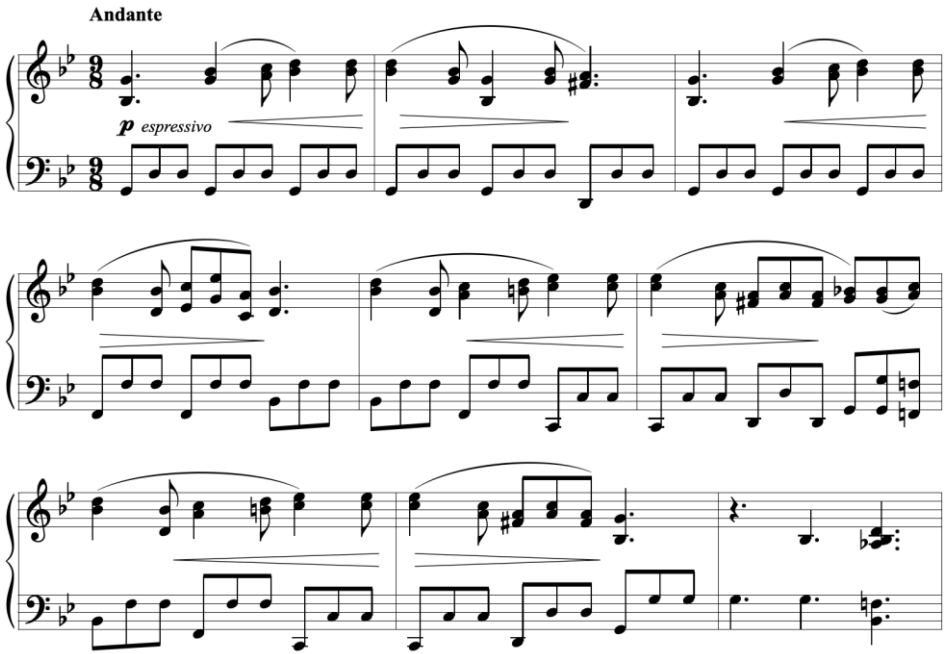
Ex. 2b. Ludwig Berger, *Etude* in G minor op. 12, no. 11 (published 1819), opening bars.

Another example of a 'wordless song' is Beethoven's *'Moonlight' Sonata* op. 27. According to William Kinderman "the sonata is dedicated to Countess Giulietta Guicciardi who was incorrectly regarded in the nineteenth century as the likely recipient

[16] Berger was strongly influenced by Beethoven's sonatas. His own *Sonata pathétique* op. 7 shares the key and character with Beethoven's masterpiece.

of Beethoven's *Letter to the Immortal Beloved*. In light of this, the opening slow movement was misconstrued as a kind of love-song without words"[17].

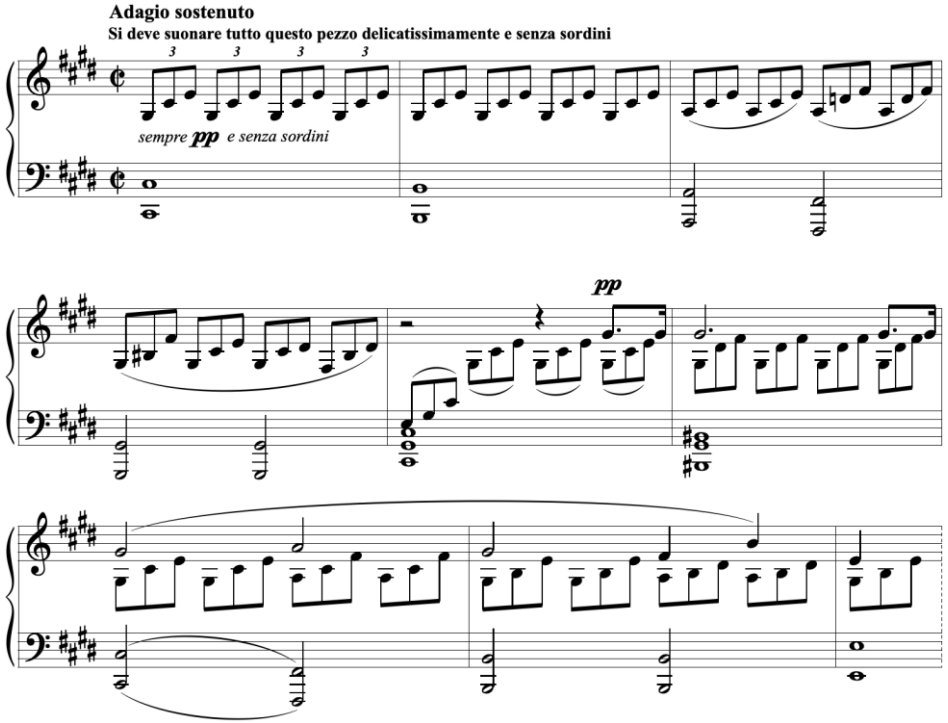
Biographical context aside, this 'misconstruction' is, in part, justified: whether this is a love song and to whom it could have been directed remains disputable; but the Lied-like texture of the first movement seems quite evident (Ex. 3).



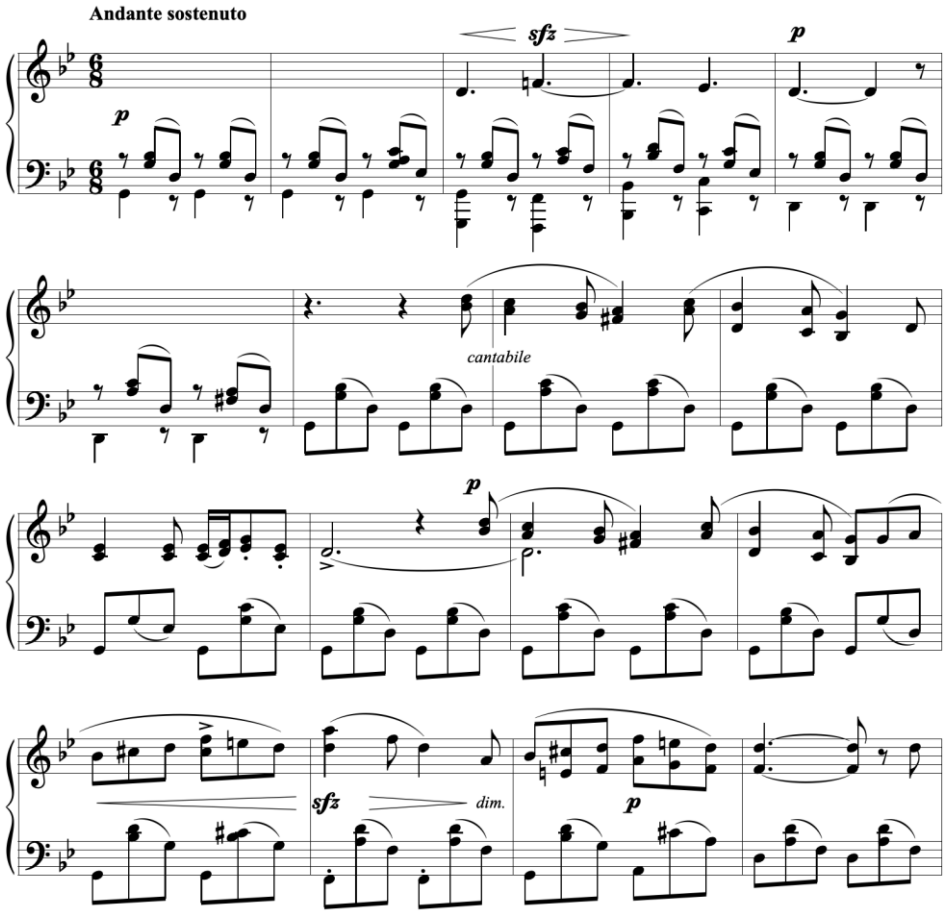
Ex. 3. Ludwig van Beethoven, *Piano Sonata* in C sharp minor op. 27, no. 2, *'Moonlight Sonata'*, 1st movement, opening bars.

Furthermore, two other Beethoven's sonatas show textural analogies with Mendelssohn's *Lieder ohne Worte*: firstly, the second movement of the *Piano Sonata* in G major op. 79 (1809) corresponds with Mendelssohn's *Venetianisches Gondellied* op. 19, no 6. Both pieces share the same key, a rocking triple meter of a *barcarolle* and a two-part melody in parallel intervals (thirds or sixths), perhaps representing a 'Love Duet' sung during a Venetian gondola trip (Ex. 4a and 4b).

17 Kinderman, *Beethoven*, 73.

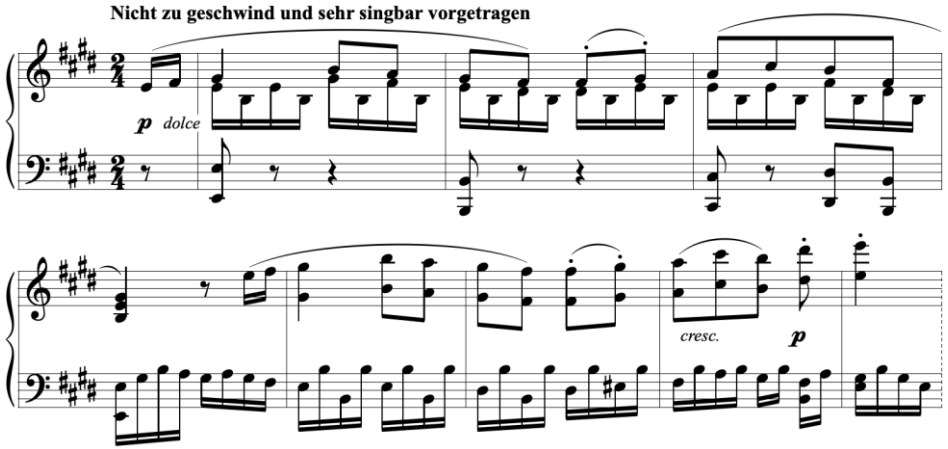


Ex. 4a. Ludwig van Beethoven, *Piano Sonata* in G major op. 79,
2nd movement: 'Barcarolle', 'Love Duet'.

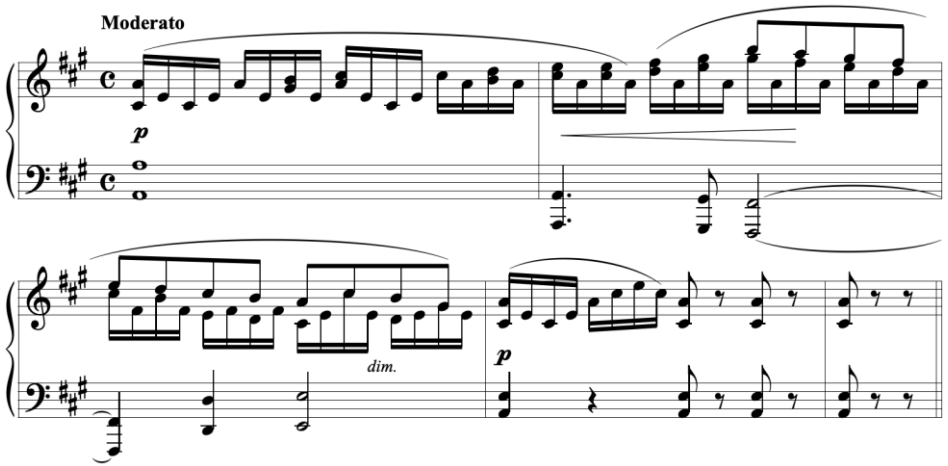


Ex. 4b. Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, *Venetianisches Gondellied* (*Lieder ohne Worte*), op. 19, no. 6.

The pattern used in the second movement from *Sonata in E minor* op. 90, on the other hand, is one of the most evident examples of a 'Lied ohne Worte' texture with its characteristic eight-note melody played *legato* on top of a sixteenth-note accompanying voice of the right hand, which can also be recognized in Mendelssohn's op. 19, no. 4 (Ex. 5a and 5b).



Ex. 5a. Ludwig van Beethoven, *Piano Sonata* in E minor op. 90, second movement.



Ex. 5b. Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, *Lieder ohne Worte*, op. 19, no. 4.

3. "*Triffst du nur ein Zauberwort*": Looking for Words Behind the 'Wordless'

In Sulzer's *Allgemeine Theorie der schönen Künste* (1771) Johann Peter Abraham Schultz insisted that a vocal piece be composed in such a way that it makes up a complete whole even without words[18]. However, to some extent, the expressions like 'Wordless Song' or *song without words* (especially the latter) imply that there is something missing in the piece – an essential flaw that needs to be fixed. As a result, the recognition of an instrumental piece as intrinsically 'vocal', often provokes the practice of adding text. Primarily, this seems to be motivated by the necessity of restitution of this ancient, mythical bond between music and poetry – paraphrasing Eichendorff, without the *Zauberwort* the song is perhaps still asleep and needs to be awakened. Secondarily, this practice may come from the observation that in many works a melody appearing in an instrumental part signals the materialization of an actual song later in the piece, i. e., and introduction of the same melody sung along with text. Such is the case of the final movement of Beethoven's *Ninth*, which opens with an instrumental recitative and a wordless *Ode to Joy* played by cellos and double basses (incidentally, in this version there is a half note at the beginning of the first bar instead of two quarter notes, so the two-syllable keyword "*Freude*" does not fit the musical rhythm at all). After the set of instrumental variations, the bass eventually takes over the melody with the words of Schiller's text. Interestingly, when Herbert von Karajan arranged Beethoven's *Ode* as the European Union anthem, he turned Beethoven's melody into a 'song without words' again[19].

Thirdly, there are some features of the music, such as, for example, a song-like form and regular metric structure of the melody, which provides an excellent opportunity for adding lyrics. Stanisław Moniuszko, the nineteenth-century master of Polish song, once wrote in a letter: "To me at least it seems that any good poem brings melody already with itself, and the one who is able to grasp and write it down earns a reputation of a lucky composer, when he calls himself nothing else but a translator of a text into a musical language"[20].

Since there seems to be some intrinsic 'musicality' inside every good poem, there may also be 'verses' behind music; only do they need to be brought to the surface[21] through

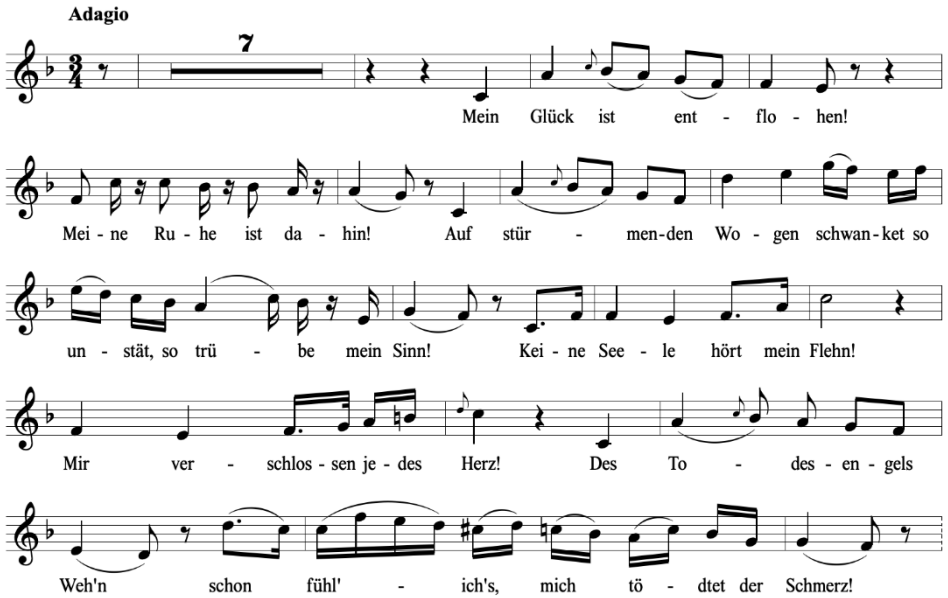
18 Sulzer, *Allgemeine Theorie der schönen Künste*, 1079.

19 Grajter, "Muzyczna Unia Europejska...", 189.

20 Moniuszko, *Listy zebrane*, 61. Own translation.

21 The lyrics by Louis Pomey, used in the arrangements of Frederic Chopin's *Mazurkas* by Pauline Viardot-Garcia, belong to the best-known examples of such procedure, just as the poems of Kornel Ujejski, who wrote a cycle of poetry called *Tłomaczenia Chopina* (*Translating Chopin*, 1866). Even Mendelssohn's *Songs without*

an inverse process, which Mieczysław Tomaszewski called "translating music into poetry"[22]. In the case of Beethoven's piano music, such attempts were made with the composer's knowledge and acceptance. According to Anton Schindler, "sometimes he recommended putting appropriate words to a perplexing passage and singing it"[23]. Apparently following these recommendations, his friends and contemporaries wrote lyrics to some of these pieces. Thanks to Franz Wegeler, the second movement from op. 2, no. 1 became a song with words with a title *Klage*, semantically in accordance with the *suspiratio* and *pathopoia* in the original melody (Ex. 6).



Ex. 6. *Die Klage*. Lyrics to Beethoven's *Piano Sonata* in F minor op. 2, no.1, 2nd movement, written by Franz Wegeler.

words did receive their 'missing' words, most recently in the project *Lieder mit Worten* recorded by Berliner Vokalensemble under Bernd Stegman in 2011.

22 Tomaszewski, *Chopin. Człowiek – Dzieło – Rezonans*, 657.

23 Schindler, *Beethoven as I Knew Him*, 416.

Beethoven must have been satisfied with it, since he reportedly asked Wegeler for another poem to the *Variations* from op. 26[24], which he probably never received. Meanwhile, Alois Jeitteles, the author of the text to *An die ferne Geliebte*, wrote a poem on Beethoven's death (*Beethoven's Begräbnis*) to a choral arrangement of the funeral march from the same *Sonata* by Ignaz von Seyfried.

Another case is the aforementioned op. 90: according to Anton Schindler, this piece commemorates the love affair of Prince Lichnowsky, to whom the *Sonata* was dedicated, with an opera singer Josefa Stummer; hence Schindler describes its second movement as *Conversation mit der Geliebten*[25]. Musically, this lyrical rondo opens with what could be characterized as "*ein Liebeslied in Dialogform*"[26], or, in other words – a 'Love Duet', that is "the instrumental transposition of a dialogue between a vocal line in bass/tenor range and another one in the alto/soprano ambit"[27]. Following this observation, Hartmut Krones tried to reconstruct the possible lyrics, which correspond to the character of a dialogue (including the 'feminine' and 'masculine' verses)[28] and perhaps the story underlying the composition.

Er: Liebstes Herz, deine Küsse / ach, sie rauben meine Ruh.
Sie: Liebster Mann, viele tausend / hauch ich Zitternde Dir zu.
Er: Wann bist du mein? Und ich ganz Dein? Geliebte mit Dir möchte / ich ewig glücklich sein.
Sie: Bleib' Du bei mir / Dann will ich Dir ergeben ach! und liebend / die treue Gattin sein.[29]

Interestingly, a 'Love Duet' was recognized by Anton Schindler already in op. 14, no. 2: "*ein Dialog zwischen Mann und Frau, oder Liebhaber und Geliebte*" ["a dialogue between a man and a woman, or lover and beloved"][30], appears in its most distinguishable version in the closing section of the exposition in op. 14, no. 2, 1st movement[31] (Ex. 7).

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24 Furthermore "*wünschte Beethoven zugleich einen Text zu dem Thema der Variationen zu haben, womit die grosse dem Fürsten Lichnowsky dedicierte* Sonate *op. 26 anfängt*". Wegeler and Ries, *Biographische Notizen über Ludwig van Beethoven*, 61.

25 Schindler, *Beethoven as I Knew Him*, 210.

26 Krones, *Von der Beethoven'schen Redekunst am Pianoforte*, 102.

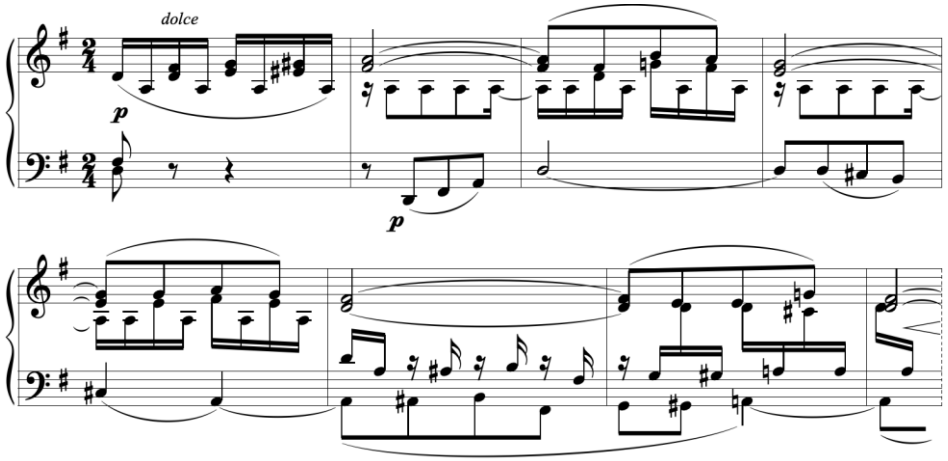
27 Grimalt, *Brahms's "Intermezzi" as (Hidden) Narrative Cycles*, 80.

28 The 'feminine' verses are corresponding with musical phrases transposed an octave higher.

29 Krones, *Von der Beethoven'schen Redekunst am Pianoforte*, 102-103.

30 Schindler, *Biographie von Ludwig van Beethoven*, 224.

31 Grimalt (*Mapping Musical Signification*, 302-303), in turn, describes this passage as a kind of "uneven dialogue", rooted in the classic *commedia dell'arte*: "both upper voices in parallel motion and the 'plucked string' accompaniment suggest a 'vocal duet' as in 'serenade'. The male character responding to them can be heard as a reference to *basso buffo*, a comic role who has definitely no love relationship with the ladies". This example shows how differently the same music can be viewed by different interpreters.



Ex. 7. Ludwig van Beethoven, *Piano Sonata* in G major op. 14, no. 2, 1st movement, epilogue (exposition)

Contrariwise, a 'voiceless' piano transcription of a song enforces a reduction of the original text, at least in its audible, performed version. In the case of Czerny's transcription of Mozart's *Lacrimosa* (1828) the subtitle overtly advertised this piece as wordless ("*mit Weglassung der Worte*")[32]. Other composers, e. g., Franz Liszt or Clara Schumann, however, decided to publish the original words in the score. Either way "when one hears a textless arrangement of a known vocal composition, an inevitable, although often unconscious mental process is triggered that supplies the missing textual dimension. One silently sings along"[33].

Consequently, this kind of song is definitely not "wordless" by nature: it was written with words and for words; any act of removing them for the sake of an instrumental arrangement will never change this reality[34].

32 Kregor, *Liszt as Transcriber*, 20.

33 Gibbs, "Beyond Song…", 233.

34 The same goes for quotations from songs and pieces written evidently with words in the background – these works may carry some encoded, cryptic meaning. Brahms is a wonderful model for that, when he almost quotes his songs from op. 105 in the *Sonata for violin and piano* op. 100: *Wie Melodien zieht es mir* in the first, and *Immer leiser wird mein Schlummer* in the third movement. He also provides us with an example of apparently absolute music but clearly composed with a certain text and a part of its structure in mind: *Intermezzo* op. 117, which has the beginning of Herder's translation of a Scottish folksong *Lady Anne Botwell's lament* as its motto.

Conclusion

To summarize, 'Wordless Song', 'song without words' and song piano transcription are, in fact, akin musical phenomena defined by the following features, which constitute all of them, either separately or, in the best case, combined together:

1. A distinguishable melodic part with range similar to that of a human voice;
2. A texture that implies the presence of a vocal line with accompaniment;
3. A regular form and metric structure imitating that of a poem set to music.

They are, however, different in the ontological aspect: in the case of the song transcription their "wordlessness" is not an original idea of the composer, but rather a result of their **reception** and painstaking effort to transpose their texture for piano solo; still, even so, the text may be visible in the score. Only during the performance of their piano version, when the words are unheard, do these 'songs' become empirically wordless. In turn, 'songs without words' and 'Wordless Song' are originally **intended** as wordless. Both could be metaphorically described as resulting from an immediate process of transcribing some imaginary, abstract song.

Interestingly though, the musical topic of a 'Wordless Song' historically preceded real song transcriptions for piano solo, since it can be traced already in Beethoven's sonatas composed around 1800. In this context, these textural experiments appear as a kernel out of which the later 'unsung songs' for piano, both literal and figurative, grew. On the other hand, the development of more advanced transcription techniques enabled late romantics, e. g., Johannes Brahms or Sergei Rachmaninov, to use vocal topics like 'Wordless Song' or 'Love Duet' in a more prolific way.

Today, the knowledge of these techniques seems to be a helpful tool in detecting some objective markers and features of these vocal topics in so-called absolute music for piano and deciphering meanings behind them. Certainly, it would be interesting to examine more thoroughly to which extent the art of piano transcription and piano reduction in general enriched the repertoire of musical meanings in the 19th century music for piano.

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