

Franz Schubert, *Ellens Gesang III (Ave Maria)* as a Readymade

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ABSTRACT – The paper traces the provenance of Franz Schubert’s famous song, *Ave Maria! Jungfrau mild*, starting from the source of inspiration of Sir Walter Scott’s poem, continuing with Schubert’s own composition, set to the German translation by Adam Storck, and with the post-mortem adaptation of the German text into the established Latin one by the composer’s brother, Ferdinand Schubert, for church use. The musical analysis of the piece starts from the historical context and captures the aforementioned poetic sources in Schubert’s music. This paper looks into aspects related to the aesthetics of tonality, according to the theorizations of Christian Friedrich Daniel Schubart, whereas the formal analysis presents the stability of the musical form, based on the classical structure of the lyrics. Further discussed is the influence these literary texts had in the epoch. In the course of the paper, the author provides a versified Romanian translation of the German version of Schubert’s song, proposing not only the preservation of the meaning but also the harmonization of the words with the musical structure. The study also examines the reception of the song in contemporary times, following great singers or performers who have established its popularity, but also versions used in animated films, arrangements in punkademics manner, covers or crossover approaches, while also touching the Romanian musical space (through singers’ interpretations or works by Romanian composers). The author concludes that the entire process of the historical evolution of the piece is based on stages corresponding to the readymade aesthetics.

Keywords: reception of Franz Schubert, *Ellens Gesang III (Ave Maria)*, punkademics, readymade.

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1. Introduction. About the writer and the original text

When we listen to Schubert's famous *Ave Maria*, we should realize that something does not fit, by the lack of consistency between the accents of the text and those of the melody... This is true because the Viennese musician wrote his song using a different text. We will now deal with the original poem and its author.

Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832) – the founder of the literary genre of the historical novel – was a lawyer and antiquarian. He began his literary activity as a translator (including from Goethe's works) and collector of Scottish literary folklore. He published some of his extensive original works anonymously¹. In the aftermath of the British banking crisis of 1825 and despite his fame, the writer – very prolific in his later years – died in poverty.

His epic poem *The Lady of the Lake* (1810) was one of the literary works most appreciated by the public and the Romantic artists. Gioachino Rossini perpetuated the subject in the opera *La donna del lago* (1819, gaining popularity also on the German stages), and Franz Schubert, in *Songs* op. 52 (1825)².

The poem recounts the feud between two Scottish clans in the first half of the 16th century; the secondary plot consists of the (political and amorous) contest among three men to win the love of the noble Ellen Douglas, the one who is the "Lady of the Lake". Before the decisive battle between the clans, Ellen sings her prayer, accompanying herself on the harp.

The German translator Adam Storck (1780-1822), a professor and historian, published works by Walter Scott, in his capacity as editor of the culture magazine *Hermann*. His version of this poem contains changes in content and versification compared to the English original.

Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy also composed a song (before Schubert) (1820; MWV K2) to the lyrics of the first stanza, in the same German version by Adam Storck³.

In the absence of a Romanian version of Adam Storck's poem *Ellens Gesang III*, I have come up with my own literary translation, in which I tried to preserve the versified morphology of the German version.

¹ Deutsch, "The Walter Scott Songs", 330.

² Other operas inspired by Sir Walter Scott's poem were composed by François-Adrien Boieldieu, François-Esprit Auber, Heinrich Marschner, Otto Nicolai, Georges Bizet. The most famous one has remained *Lucia de Lammermoor* (1835) by Gaetano Donizetti.

³ Here, Mendelssohn's musical discourse imitates the Italian Baroque style; the evolving form develops the first stanza of the text into three musical segments.

2. About the composer and his work

Franz Schubert's name (1797-1828) is mainly related to the musical genre of the song, in which he composed over six hundred pieces. They used to be sung in informal private gatherings, in private salons in Vienna or the surrounding area – gatherings called, already in his lifetime, “Schubertiades”, attended by art lovers and artists: writers, musicians, fine artists.

In 1825, Schubert selected seven songs from Walter Scott's poem *Lady of the Lake*, in the free German translation by Adam Storck⁴. The songs are not written for a single character and performer, but for different types of solo voices, female or male, while two are songs for vocal ensembles:

1. *Ellens Gesang I* [*Ellen's First Song*], for soprano and piano, D 837;
2. *Ellens Gesang II* [*Ellen's Second Song*], for soprano and piano, D 838;
3. *Bootgesang* [*Boat Song*], for two tenors, two basses and piano, D 835;
4. *Coronach* (*Totengesang der Frauen und Mädchen*), [*Coronach*⁵ (*Funeral song of the women and girls*)], for female choir and piano, D 836;
5. *Norman Gesang* [*Norman's Song*], for baritone and piano, D 846;
6. *Ellens Gesang III* [*Ellen's Third Song*], for soprano and piano, D 839;
7. *Lied des gefangenen Jägers* [*Song of the imprisoned huntsman*], for baritone and piano, D 843.

Most of the songs were composed while the author was on vacation, together with a singer friend, in Steyregg (near Linz), and are dedicated to the hostess, Countess Sophie Weissenwolf. He was already seriously ill with syphilis, aware of the extreme gravity of his condition. In a letter to his parents, Schubert relates how “people are surprised by the religious feeling I have expressed in the hymn to the Blessed Virgin, by which every heart is struck and solemnly impressed. The reason, I think, is that I never force myself to think religiously. I never compose such hymns and supplications unless I am unconsciously overwhelmed, and so usually devotion is true and real”⁶.

A year later, in Vienna, Schubert published the cycle *Sieben Gesänge aus Walter Scotts “Fräulein am See”* [*Seven Songs from Walter Scott's “Lady of the Lake”*],

⁴ With W. Scott, these songs are placed in consecutive days of action; musically, they are described in Deutsch, “The Walter Scott Songs”, 333-335.

⁵ Improvisational funeral lament from the Scottish-Welsh tradition.

⁶ July 25, 1825; Deutsch, “The Walter Scott Songs”, 331; Reed, *The Schubert Song Companion*, 217. Translation from the English version (with the repetitions therein).

as Opus 52, with bilingual text (German and English⁷), hoping to make himself known in England as well. Another edition appeared in London, in 1828; then, in 1832, in London again, Schubert's song *Erkönig* [*King of the Fairies*] was published with lyrics by Goethe, with the English version by Walter Scott – so it is possible that the writer learned of the young Viennese who had just died and of his music, set to his poem⁸.

During the same period, Schubert was also inspired by other poems by Walter Scott, translated into German by different authors: *Lied der Anne Lyle* (op. 85 no. 1, 1825?, D 830; “Anne Lyle’s Song”, from the novel *Montrose*), *Gesang der Norna* (op. 85 no. 2, 1825, D 831; “Norna’s Song”, from the novel *The Pirate*) and *Romanze des Richard Löwenherz* (op. 86, 1926, D 907; “The Romance of Richard the Lionheart”, from *Ivanhoe*)⁹.

The *Seven Songs* op. 52 are hardly ever sung. Schubert himself never had the opportunity to hear them successively, as a whole¹⁰. Instead, *Ellen’s Third Song* became his most famous piece. Especially after the Latin prayer *Ave Maria*¹¹ was set to his melody – to make it suitable for church use – by the composer’s brother, Ferdinand Schubert, in Vienna, on Christmas Eve in 1842, in an arrangement for solo tenor, chorus and orchestra¹².

The great popularity of the piece grew with its adaptations, among the first being those for piano, including those by Franz Liszt (1837-1838)¹³.

⁷ This causes prosodic difficulties, given the differences between the two versions; in an interview, Schubert had stated that he intended to compose bilingual pieces, to texts translated from English, Spanish, French and Italian, in order to expand the repertoire for amateurs (cf. Deutsch, “The Walter Scott Songs”, 332).

⁸ Deutsch, “The Walter Scott Songs”, 331; 335.

⁹ Deutsch, “The Walter Scott Songs”, 332.

¹⁰ Deutsch, “The Walter Scott Songs”, 330.

¹¹ Consisting of three segments of text: The Annunciation Greeting (*Ave Maria...* – Luke 1, 28), Elisabeth’s greeting (*Benedictus fructus ventris tui* – Luke 1, 42) and a late medieval addition (*Sancta... ora... mortis nostrae. Amen*).

¹² Ferdinand Schubert’s adapted manuscript is preserved in the archive of St. Peter’s Church in Vienna (Deutsch, “The Walter Scott Songs”, 334).

¹³ The previous piece, “Ellen’s Second Song”, with a hunting character, later inspired Johannes Brahms in his vocal-instrumental arrangements (1862 and 1873); the second one: for soprano solo, three-part women’s choir, four horns and two bassoons (cf. Deutsch, “The Walter Scott Songs”, 333).

3. Analytical and subjective notes

Have you noticed the swaying rhythm of the piano accompaniment? It could be an illustration of the text: “to sleep, and your protection hovers over us”. Or is it the suggestion of the harp, with which Walter Scott’s heroine accompanies herself?...¹⁴ But also a manifestation of Schubert’s personal style, combining constant rhythmic formulas on the piano with the suppleness of the vocal melody¹⁵.

The stability of the piece is given not only by the rhythm of the piano but also by the key. The deviations from B flat major are minimal – just a few short slips into neighboring minor keys, like little clouds that only enhance the beauty of the sunlight. In addition, let us remember that, according to classical aesthetics, B flat major signifies an “aspiration for a better world”, as Schubart wrote in 1784¹⁶.

The form is also stable. Not only through the melodic repetition of the three stanzas but also through the sextuple enunciation of the refrain framing them. However, the piece is anything but monotonous – because the phrases within the stanza are linked in an evolving, flexible, expressive way¹⁷.

4. Contemporary echoes

Schubert’s piece is most commonly sung with the text of the Latin prayer *Ave Maria* (with that unnatural prosodic application of accents described above), or, at other times, performed purely instrumentally. It is sung by great singers of all generations – Maria Callas, Luciano Pavarotti or Plácido Domingo, as well as by the very young ones. Among the famous violinists, I mention the sober interpretation of Yehudi Menuhin, the broadly paced one of Maxim Vengerov, and the immaterial one of David Garrett.

¹⁴ Fischer-Dieskau, *A Schubert-dalok nyomában*, 256.

¹⁵ A typical aspect of Schubert’s songs. Furthermore, here, the piano arpeggios are similar to those from an earlier song, *Die Nonne* (*The Nun*; 1815; D 212, mm. 33-40). See Reed, *The Schubert Song Companion*, 217.

¹⁶ Franz Schubert was most probably also familiar with the theoretical writings of Christian Friedrich Daniel Schubart, from whose works he set four poems to music, including *Die Forelle* [*The Trout*] (1816-17; op. 32/D 550).

¹⁷

Lyrics	---	l	(2+3)	4	(5+6)	(7+8)	9	---
Music	[intr.	(rf + a)	b	c	// d	e	rf.	epilogue] = stanza A x3.
	B flat		~	F	B flat	~	B flat	
	4 x 2 = 8 measures			//	(4 x 2) - 1 = 7 measures			

Thus, there is a “counterpoint” between the morphology of the lyrics and that of the melody, organized by units of two measures each (the last one, contracted).

Schubert's piece, in the musical arrangement of conductor Leopold Stokowski, concludes Walt Disney's animated film *Fantasia* (1940). After the demonic sequences with allusions to the Biblical "Apocalypse" and after the phantasms have vanished (images associated with Mussorgsky's symphonic poem *A Night on the Bald Mountain*), the bells herald the morning, and the *Ave Maria* becomes a natural continuation. Schubert's song is sung with new lyrics, in English¹⁸. The timbres used are the mixed choir, string orchestra, harp and solo soprano, and the mists dissolve under the rising Sun. With a pronounced idyllic tone, the fragment was reproduced in a new arrangement in the video album *Very Merry Christmas Songs* (1988), from the *Disney Sing-Along Songs* series.

Punk singer Nina Hagen (b. 1955) promotes her versions of Schubert's original. Her song was released in concert, and, more than ten years later, it was included in the album *Live in Krefeld* (2001; the second CD of the album). The text (author not indicated) is new: it has two stanzas with lyrics evoking human problems (hunger, absence of faith, fear of death) and a call to fraternity (allusions to Schiller's *Ode to Joy*), and also a vocalized stanza (with synthesizer, in quasi-human high register). Although there are many changes in the version described here¹⁹ – instrumentation, a faster tempo, rhythm with dance suggestions, the soloist's chest voice –, the song preserves its original character. The instrumental coda uses the refrain "Maria, Maria, Maria" from Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story*. This is a typical example of the fusion between punk and academic music, *punkademics*²⁰.

Ave Maria by Beyoncé (b. 1981) from the album *I Am...* (2008) is a paraphrase of Schubert's melody, with a collective of authors of the lyrics and music (taking only a few elements of the accompaniment and refrain of the original), which, in turn, has spawned cover versions²¹.

From the diversity of *crossover* arrangements with different texts, I mention those sung by Céline Dion, Andrea Bocelli (who has the intelligence to rearrange the Latin prayer to the melody so that the accents of the text fit the music), Michael Bolton, Vitas.

Romanian singers from different generations and styles have integrated the masterpiece into their repertoire, with the Latin text; among them: sopranos Emilia Petrescu, Angela Gheorghiu, Felicia Filip, Bianca Manoleanu, and pop singer Paula Seling.

¹⁸ By American writer Rachel Field (1884-1942); her lyrics are reproduced in full in the article section [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ave_Maria_\(Schubert\)#Used_in_Fantasia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ave_Maria_(Schubert)#Used_in_Fantasia) (1940), accessed 7 October 2019.

¹⁹ Sony ATV Publishing, at: youtube.com/watch?v=v-0s4I2OnAo. Many other live versions are available on YouTube.

²⁰ A term introduced by Furness, *Punkademics. The Basement Show in the Ivory Tower*. Collegial thanks to composer Irinel Anghel (Bucharest) for pointing this out.

²¹ [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ave_Maria_\(Beyonc%C3%A9_song\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ave_Maria_(Beyonc%C3%A9_song)).

From among the Romanian authors, I have learned about arrangements made by composers Dumitru Capoianu (1929-2012)²² and Olguța Lupu (b. 1969). The last version mentioned has the bright accompaniment of the voices of a children's choir²³.

Sometimes, the musical theme becomes the seed of a new song (*Ave Maria*, 1990) – a pop song signed by Cornel Fugaru (1940-2011; on lyrics by Mirela Fugaru) and released by Gabriel Cotabiță. In this call to faith after decades of communist atheism, Schubert's first phrase is used as a motto and refrain, with Schubert's name being remembered only for his famous opening of the song.

But the problem of the multitude of interpretive versions and arrangements of Schubert's song has unfortunately drifted into the risky and pernicious territory of kitsch²⁴. The solution could come from going back to Schubert's original (!).

In conclusion, the piece is – from its beginnings to the present day – a starting material that attests to the readymade practice²⁵, from Romanticism to pop culture.

5. Conclusion

Would you agree that all the borrowing/arranging processes mentioned above illustrate the readymade practice?

The statement is valid starting from the literary text, from Walter Scott to Adam Storck and then to all subsequent translations of Schubert's song, especially the *Ave Maria* text added by Ferdinand Schubert. This seems to have been the key element that has propelled the piece, given its popularity – across all ages. It should be emphasized that popularity is critical in ensuring readymade propulsion.

In our opinion, the present example is edifying – up to its modern-day ramifications.

²² Popa, "Statuie pentru compozitorul Dumitru Capoianu..."; I have no knowledge of the whereabouts of the score and/or recording.

²³ YouTube, the "Symbol" choir of the Romanian Patriarchate, conductor Jean Lupu, soloist Ana Cebotari (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A2BQ_r3xG7o).

²⁴ Gibbs 1997, 10.

²⁵ This practice is found, in fact, in all the traditional music and in the styles of European art music; it has been the subject of an applicative monographic research study on contemporary instrumental music, conducted by composer Vlad Hirilav-Maistorovici (*Readymade și tehnici componistice contemporane*).

Ave Maria! Maiden mild!
by Walter Scott

Ave Maria! Maiden mild!
Listen to a maiden's entreaty
from this wild unyielding rock
my prayer shall be wafted to you.
We shall sleep safely until morning,
however cruel men may be.
O Maiden, behold a maiden's cares,
O Mother, hear a suppliant child!
Ave Maria!

Ave Maria! Undeiled!
When we sink down upon this rock
to sleep, and your protection hovers over us,
the hard rock shall seem soft to us.
You smile, and the fragrance of roses
Wafis through this musty cavern.
O Mother, hear a suppliant child,
O Maiden, a maiden cries to you!
Ave Maria!

Ave Maria! Purest Maiden!
Demons of the earth and air,
banished by the grave of your gaze,
cannot dwell with us here.
Let us silently bow to our fate,
since your holy comfort touches us
incline in grace to a maiden,
to a child that prays for its father.
Ave Maria!

Ave Maria! Jungfrau mild
Translated by Adam Storck

Ave Maria! Jungfrau mild,
Erhöre einer Jungfrau Flehen,
Aus diesem Felsen starr und wild
Soll mein Gebet zu dir hinwehen.
Wir schlafen sicher bis zum Morgen,
Ob Menschen noch so grausam sind.
O Jungfrau, sieh der Jungfrau Sorgen,
O Mutter, hör ein bitend Kind!
Ave Maria!

Ave Maria! Unbefleckt!
Wenn wir auf diesen Fels hinsinken
Zum Schlaf, und uns dein Schutz bedeckt
Wird weich der harte Fels uns dünken.
Du lächelst, Rosendüfte wehen
In dieser dumpfen Felsenkluft,
O Mutter, höre Kindes Flehen,
O Jungfrau, eine Jungfrau rufi!
Ave Maria!

Ave Maria! Reine Magd!
Der Erde und der Luft Dämonen,
Von deines Auges Huld verjagt,
Sie können hier nicht bei uns wohnen.
Will woll'n uns still dem Schicksal beugen,
Da uns dein heil'ger Trost anweht;
Der Jungfrau wolle hold dich neigen,
Dem Kind, das für den Vater fleht.
Ave Maria!

Ave, Maria! suflet blând
Translated by Elena-Maria Șorban*
Sehr langsam [Very slowly]
[The original key of the piece: B flat major]

Ave, Maria! Suflet blând,
Ascultă plânsul feciorelnic
Din ceste vârfuri tari de stânci,
Ajungă-mi ruga pân' la tine.
Dormim noi siguri, până-n ziuă,
Chiar oamenii de sunt prea cruzi.
Fecioară, vezi-mi grija pură,
O, mamă,-ascultă al tău prunc!
Ave, Maria!

Ave, Maria! Ne-ntinată!
De noi cădem din astă stâncă
În somn adânc, de tin' vegheat,
Moale ne pare acest pat.
Surâzi: a rozelor mireasmă
Plutește lin peste abis,
O, Mamă,-ascultă jalea noastră,
Fecioară, pură, eu te chem!**
Ave, Maria!

Ave, Maria! Pură Servă!
Tereștri ori din aer, demoni,
Goniți de haru-ți din priviri
Nu pot la noi sălaş să afle.
Noi ne-nclinăm în fața soartei,
Păziți prin sprijinu-ți cel sfânt;
Fecioarei dă-i încredințare,
Copilei, Tatăl implorând.
Ave, Maria!

* From the German version by Adam Storck, used by Schubert.

** A similar parallel to the one in the previous stanza (see the previous explanatory note) – so the epithet “pură” [pure] is a self-reference of the lyrical self.

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Translated from Romanian by Marcella Magda