

Schubert's 'Trauerwalzer': Background and Analysis

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Upon first glance of Schubert's waltz collection Op. 9 (D.365), one would notice that the second one is singled out by its title – *Trauerwalzer* (or *Sehnsuchtswalzer*). It would seem odd that of the 36 waltzes in Op. 9, only this one was given a name. In fact, upon hearing this title, which roughly translates to 'melancholy waltz' or 'mourning waltz', Schubert apparently responded in dismay: "What ass would compose a 'mournful' waltz?" Although the origins of its name is unknown, the tune and its title was known to all in Vienna (and beyond) by the early 1820s. What could have led to its immense popularity, and how did it get its title? Possible answers can be found in its historical context¹ and in the music itself.

The *Trauerwalzer*'s true date of composition is unknown, although most sources list the year 1816. The 19-year-old Schubert at this time was known to few, and the piece was only disseminated to his close friends and patrons. Several existing copies of the piece show that it has undergone some minor changes, although the harmonic and melodic structures are essentially preserved. Perhaps due to its inherent charm, what was originally only known to Schubert's close circle spread quickly in Vienna, becoming a folk melody of the day.

By 1820 the *Trauerwalzer* clearly caught enough attention that soon well-known composers began to write variations and arrangements of it. The first known set of variations was written by Viennese dance composer Johann Pensel in 1820, and shortly thereafter in 1821 Carl Czerny wrote another set of variations (Op. 12). This latter set became very famous and recordings of it can be found. Its fame most likely arose as a combination of Czerny's reputation, the theme's popularity, and the flashiness and brilliance of the variations. They even quickly became known internationally in England and Paris, although Schubert's name of course was not attributed to the work. Arrangements for flute, violin, guitar, and even multiple vocal arrangements soon became published too. The existence of many variations and arrangements of the waltz is not only an indication of its popularity but also most likely a major factor in its continual spread in the 1820s.

¹Much of the historical context is summarized from Maurice J.E. Brown's detailed chapter titled 'The story of the 'Trauerwalzer' [1]. The reader is strongly recommended there for more well-researched details.

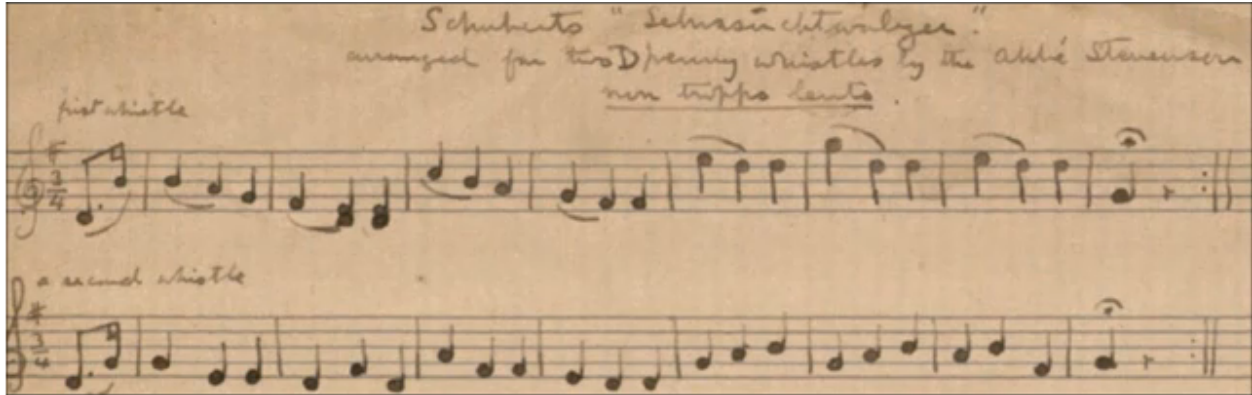


Figure 1: An arrangement for whistles by Robert Louis Stevenson. (Stevenson manuscript from the Yale University Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library.)

A different name soon became attached to the waltz for much of the 19th century – Beethoven. In 1826 the *Trauerwalzer* was combined with another waltz (as a trio), published under the title ‘Le Désir’, and was attributed to Beethoven! The publisher seemed to have recognized the popularity and potential of the piece, but in a business-oriented decision probably decided to publish it under Beethoven’s name to attract even greater attention. Beethoven understandably resented this misuse of his name, but his protest was to no avail; his name was continually attributed to the piece throughout the 19th century, and even to this day. Nevertheless, this attribution likely brought greater fame to the *Trauerwalzer*.



Figure 2: *Trauerwalzer* ... by Beethoven!

Of the many variations by other notable composers on this waltz, the case for Schumann is particularly interesting. Schumann wrote critical reviews of many Schubert works in his periodical *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, and once discussed Schubert’s Op. 9 in an 1836 essay titled *Tanzlitteratur* [2]. He clearly expressed a liking for most of the waltzes; the *Trauerwalzer* was one of the few that he did *not*. Ironically, he did begin to compose a set of variations but left it unfinished – although he did re-use its opening measures for the opening of his famous work *Carnaval*. The unfinished state of these variations may be an indication of his dislike for the waltz. In particular, he remarked in his review that the piece expresses “a hundred girlish feelings”. This seems to be Schumann’s interpretation of the ‘melancholy’ that gives the piece its famous title. The consensus between Schumann and his Viennese contemporaries on the melancholic character of the *Trauerwalzer* is probably not simply coincidental. In particular, let us explore possible origins of the charm, popularity, and melancholy of the piece from a musical perspective.

Trauer-Walzer. (1816.)

Nº 2.

Figure 3: Harmonic analysis of the *Trauerwalzer*.

Much of the charm and subsequent popularity of the *Trauerwalzer* can probably be attributed to its simple harmonic structure. The piece has a very standard waltz structure, with 16 full measures consisting of two major sections, each 8 bars long. The bass is also a standard waltz accompaniment. Roughly half the piece is an alternation between the tonic and dominant harmonies of the designated key, Ab major. In the first section the only harmonically interesting figure is in the first two measures, with a standard I-vii^o₆-I⁶ progression in the first measure followed by a subdominant. These two measures are then replicated in sequence starting on ii and reaching V. Most of the structure is then repeated in the second section, with an essentially identical anacrusis, a sequence of two-measure descending phrases (covered more later), and another I-V alternation. The simplicity and symmetry in the harmonic structure and overall form of the piece makes it very pleasant and charming. However, it verges on the point of being mundane were it not so brief.

Perhaps the only truly interesting harmonic figure lies in measures 11-14. Within these four measures the tonal center shifts very dramatically but with such graceful economy that it is almost difficult to detect. First starting at the parallel Ab minor, the next two chords in measure 12 is written in a sharp key – B major, the enharmonic equivalent of the relative major (Cb). Very quickly though in the final chord of that measure, the A_♯ reveals that this is in fact the dominant seventh of E major, which measure 13 settles upon. The key quickly changes back just as quickly; measure 14 contains an enharmonically similar German sixth in the original key of Ab major, followed by a standard cadential six-four resolution and ending. Schubert's genius is exemplified by his ability to perform this complex modulation almost without disturbance to the overall melodic structure.

The simplicity and grace in the execution of the harmony reasonably explains its folk popularity. But why the name? Harmonically the *Trauerwalzer* appears like a skeletal form of countless other pieces of the same era. To answer this we must turn to the melodic structure. The descending sequence of ‘sighing’ motifs at the beginning of both sections is immediately apparent (e.g., in the R.L. Stevenson arrangement in Figure 1). Each section begins with a two-bar melodic phrase that symbolizes an extended ‘sigh’, a gesture of unrest, only to be strengthened and followed in sequence by another one. Even in the remaining four bars of each section, less prolonged versions of these ‘sighs’ continue, where the strong beat falls on a higher note that then descends to more stable chord tone.

Closely related to this is the frequent use of non-harmonic tones in the melody (where essentially all such notes lie). They appear to have two major purposes. First, the use of passing tones and suspensions in the extended ‘sighing’ phrases give greater continuity to the motifs. They are arguably essential to the motif itself; for example, consider measure 3 where the passing tone G is instead a chord-tone F – the discontinuity is apparent. Second, almost all other measures begin with neighbor tones or appoggiaturas, intentional deviations from chord-tones that sustain the tension in the waltz and giving rise to the ‘sighs’. The musical ‘sighing’ gestures combined with the tension created by the frequent structured use of accented non-harmonic tones arguably invokes interpretations of ‘yearning’ and ‘melancholy’, ultimately leading to Schumann’s comment and the seemingly odd *Trauerwalzer* title.

In Schumann’s review of Schubert’s Op. 9 waltzes, he remarks that they are “little genii” that “weave a web of fragrant airy threads”. Despite his dislike of the *Trauerwalzer*, it is undeniable that the piece shares similar a similar character. The historical development of the waltz and its variations, the simplicity and gracefulness of its harmonic structure, and the characteristic melancholic sighs of its melodic lines most likely all led to its popularly-known title. It is a pity that this once-popular waltz, as well as the rest of Op. 9, is not as well-known, especially in a time when Schubert’s name is respected far greater than when the *Trauerwalzer* was known to all. We can all benefit from, in Otto Kinkeldey’s words, being “touched by the naïve appeal of these simple, homely garlands of Schubert’s genius”.

References

- [1] Maurice J.E. Brown. The story of the ‘Trauerwalzer’. In *Essays on Schubert*, pages 291–305. Macmillan, 1966.
- [2] Otto Kinkeldey. Schubert: Dance-Composer. *The Musical Quarterly*, 14(4):610–619, Oct. 1928.