

## Erlkönig by Franz Schubert Prose Analysis

John Salehi

Erlkönig by Franz Schubert (1797-1828) is a Lied based off a German poem by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe by the same name. This piece for solo voice and piano composed in 1815 depicts a story consisting of five characters: the father, the son, the Erlkönig (aka the Erlking), the narrator, and the horse. The poem is about a father and his ill son riding on horseback through the woods late at night to find help. As they are riding on horseback, the grim reaper-like figure of the Erlking, representing death, tempts the boy with gifts and other children to play with. The child begs for help, but the worried father sees nothing. The piece ends with the child dying in his father's arms. This story is important to the prose, as this piece is through composed and would not make sense to use pure musical form while analyzing. Therefore, the form is programmatically focused as opposed musical.

The form, as analyzed through the programmatic lens, is Intro-ABCBCBCBA-Coda, where A is the Narrator, B is the Father and the Son, and C being the Erlking. While this could be seen as a Rondo, this piece is Through-Composed. Melodic ideas may appear again, but always altered enough to be different, new music. Overall, there is no specific pattern to how these are divided up as far as number of measures go, but they do have general patterns. Both A sections are relatively long and offer a good idea as to what is going on in the story. The first two C sections are long, while the last is shorter and more threatening. The B sections are the most complex, with sub phrasing being the identifying factors of the Father and Son.

The A sections are stable, but dynamically Mezzo Forte to Forte. This contrasts other sections of the piece, which will be seen later. These dynamics convey the overall story, and while dramatic, it is the least characteristic section and stays true to the character. This section's

## Erlkönig by Franz Schubert Prose Analysis

John Salehi

melody is also outlined by mostly step-wise patterns with some short melodic leaps. The ending Coda section is also sung by the Narrator and is the softest and most intimate section of the piece, ending with the translated lyrics of “the child lay dead in his arms.” Both A sections are in G-minor, with the exception of bars 143-146 which take on an A-flat Major key. The lyrics in these measures offer a glimpse of hope in the story saying, “with one last effort he (The Father) reaches home;”. The Narrator’s sections are stable and offer a good intro and closing to the piece.

Moving onto the B sections of the piece, these offer a lot more depth musically than the other sections. For the B section, I combined the Father and Son together because their individual sections are so short and the characters are conversing with each other. The first B section offers an ‘aba’ small form with ‘a’ being the Father and ‘b’ with the Son. This section stays in the previously established G-minor key center. The ‘b’ section is still stable, while the ‘a’ sections are a little more dynamically unstable with more dynamic contrast. Harmonically, for the first B section, both ‘a’ sections are stable. The second B section changes the format from ternary to binary being an ‘ab’ small form. This time around, ‘a’ is the Son and ‘b’ is the Father. This section introduces the “Son motif”. From pickups into measures 73-76, we see the first sighting of this motif where the lyrics translate to “My father, my father and do you not hear”. This motif is always accompanied by a descending diminished chord in the piano, this first one being an F-sharp diminished triad. This, coupled with a Forte dynamic gives a real sense of instability and feeling of worry from the Son. The key center for this section is B-minor which is a half-step above the B-flat Major key that occurred in the previous C section.

# Erlkönig by Franz Schubert Prose Analysis

John Salehi

73  
Va - ter, mein Va - ter, und hö - rest du  
76  
nicht,  
Mein

The third B section opens again with the “Son motif”, only this time, up a step. Once again, the key center is a half-step up and minor key of C-sharp minor compared to the previous C section’s C Major. The diminished chord under this motif is G-sharp diminished from measures 98-101. Again, this adds tension and distress to the Son’s character. The final B section offers only one character, being the Son. The last section doesn’t have the Father and offers the Son’s final words in the story. The motif appears one last time another step up. This section ends with a PAC into 131 in G-minor which brings us back to home base, and gives a retransition back to the Narrator’s character.

97  
Mein Va - ter, mein Va - ter, und  
100  
siehst du nicht dort

The C sections represent the Erlking, the character being sinister and representing death. His motive to kill the child by luring him in with different toys, children, and other seemingly innocent things. This false sense of innocence is represented by his sections all being in Major key centers. The first being B-flat Major, relative to the established first key of G-minor, second being in C-Major, and finally in E-flat Major. His melodies are characterized by larger leaps

## Erlkönig by Franz Schubert Prose Analysis

John Salehi

paired with softer dynamics and stable harmony. This adds to the façade of how evil the character really is and makes it even more frightening. The third and final C section is a little less stable. The lyrics begin to become less enticing and more threatening, matching the more unstable harmonic structure.

The last character represented throughout the whole piece is the Horse. Schubert was one of the first composers to use the piano as being more than just accompaniment. The Horse is represented in the form of repeated triplet figures in the left hand, providing a constant feeling of motion. Within the Intro, A, and B sections, the rhythm and dynamics are very unstable and adds to the notion of drama. In the C section, the state of motion is still there, but with less dynamic instability, it takes on a more stable feeling.

Erlkönig is incredibly rich with content and depth, combining melodies, harmonies, stability, and more together to create one of the most famous lieder we study today. Schubert's constant progression of new music lends it to being Through-Composed. Programmatically, it is a Rondo. When analyzing the form, the use of programmatic labelling makes the most sense, but when it comes to analyzing the music, it is safe to say it is no Rondo, but Through-Composed. The home-base of G-minor gives an unsettling feeling throughout with a somber, dramatic ending.