Dual mirrors of Müller: a comparative study of textual and musical narratives in Franz Schubert's *Die schöne Müllerin* (1823) and Edward Nesbit's *Songs of Sorrow* (2021)

Xuewei Chang
First Author, Ph. D candidate in Music Composition, Department of Music, Faculty of Creative Arts, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. **Email:** s2164294@siswa.um.edu.my **ORCID:** 0009-0005-0808-5701

Marzelan Salleh
Corresponding Author, Ph. D in Music Composition, Senior Lecture of Department of Music, Faculty of Creative Arts, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. **Email:** marzelan@um.edu.my **ORCID:** 0000-0001-6655-1305

Abstract

Franz Schubert's *Die schöne Müllerin* (1823) and Edward Nesbit's *Songs of Sorrow* (2021) are two song cycles based on Wilhelm Müller's poetic work, *Die schöne Müllerin*. These compositions, created nearly two centuries apart, reflect how different historical and cultural contexts shape composers' engagement with the same text. By conducting a comparative analysis that considers both textual and musical narrative elements, this study examines the ways in which Schubert and Nesbit interpret and transform Müller's poetry into music, highlighting their creative attitudes and distinct approaches to musical aesthetics. Schubert's *Die schöne Müllerin*, a hallmark of the Romantic era, captures the intense focus on individual emotion and communion with nature, both of which are key themes in Müller's poetry. Through Schubert's melodies and harmonic choices, the original narrative and emotional essence of the text are preserved, providing listeners with a direct experience of Romantic ideals. Conversely, Nesbit's *Songs of Sorrow* reflects a contemporary reimagining of the Romantic spirit. While he retains elements that evoke Romanticism, Nesbit simultaneously reconstructs aspects of the narrative, incorporating diverse musical styles and techniques emblematic of a 21st-century sensibility. This adaptation reflects a broader trend among contemporary composers toward freedom of interpretation and a more eclectic musical language. Ultimately, this comparative study reveals how Schubert's and Nesbit's compositions illustrate different yet interconnected aesthetic values, providing insights into the evolution of song cycle composition across time.

Keywords

Edward Nesbit, Franz Schubert, music analysis, song cycle, Wilhelm Müller

Introduction

Wilhelm Müller (1794-1827) was a German Romantic poet and writer, renowned for his two notable works, *Die schöne Müllerin* and *Winterreise*, which were transformed into song cycles by the composer Franz Schubert, becoming integral components of German Romantic music (Cottrell, 1970, p. 1). In a general sense, song cycle is a musical composition consisting of three or more interconnected songs that form coherence through poetry, music, or their interaction (Bingham, 2004, p. 101). As a cultural product of 19th-century German Romanticism, it clearly embodies the experiential concept of Romanticism, revealing the contradictory movement between the simplicity required by the German artistic tradition—artlessness, noble simplicity—and cyclic form, which gradually unfolds and inspires reality, ultimately replacing classicalism's insistence on initial clarity (Daverio, 1996, p. 279; Rosen, 1995, p. 194).

As an early representative figure of Romanticism[1], Franz Schubert's *Die schöne Müllerin* is further regarded as the first great song cycle of the nineteenth century

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[1] Gray argues that Schubert did not exhibit the radical tendencies of other "radical" romantic composers, but rather adhered to a balanced and formal structure that represented classicism, positioning him as a composer of late classicism and the last master of the Vienna School. See (Gray, 1971).

(Kimball, 2006, p. 63). The exact moment when Schubert encountered *Die schöne Müllerin* in Wilhelm Müller's poetry is uncertain. A widely circulated story suggests that Schubert discovered a poetic anthology titled *Seventy-Seven Poems from the Posthumous Papers of a Wandering Horn-Player* by Müller on the desk of Louis, Count Széchényi, and took it away (Youens, 1992, p. 1). Schubert likely commenced work promptly and completed the entire song cycle by 1823. At this time, Schubert was already suffering from a fatal venereal disease, and it is plausible that he perceived Müller's verses in a state of sadness and despair, finding resonance with his own situation (Reed, 1978, p. 414). In this cycle, aside from omitting the prologue and epilogue, Schubert also omitted three poems. Youens speculates that these omissions may have been due to their excessive length or lack of significant thematic content aiding in plot development (Youens, 1992, pp.43-65).

Both Wilhelm Müller's poetry and Schubert's song cycle continue to captivate readers, listeners, performers, and music enthusiasts with their poignant narratives and exquisite music. According to incomplete statistics, over thirty composers, including Josephine Lang, Ludwig Berger, and Karl Gottlieb Reissiger, etc., have chosen to create new works based on the poetry of Die schöne Müllerin. Josephine Lang re-composed eleven of the poems, while Ludwig Berger and Karl Gottlieb Reissiger each composed five (Müller, 2024).

Inspired by the writings left behind by Robert Falcon Scott from his Antarctic expeditions in the early months of 2021, Edward Nesbit composed *In Antarctica*, a song cycle celebrating human resilience and the willingness to sacrifice everything for idealism[2]. *In Antarctica* repeatedly references the solitary wanderer traversing

icy landscapes, akin to the imagery found in Schubert's *Winterreise*, to depict Scott's solitary journey far from the comforts of urban civilization. Shortly after completing this work, Nesbit conceived the idea of creating another song cycle *Songs of Sorrows*, which based on Schubert's *Die schöne Müllerin*. As he delved deeper into this work, he quickly realized the broad metaphorical resonance of the miller's maiden figure within German cultural history, enriched by encounters with mythology and history, which provided him with a more nuanced and flexible understanding of the narrative. Ultimately, he reconfigured a three-part plot, omitting the hunter and certain mundane daily life scenes. Like Schubert, he chose to omit prologues and epilogues that did not lend themselves well to musical adaptation. Nesbit selected twelve poems from the original text and intentionally included the three omitted by Schubert, as part of a departure from Schubert's standard practice.

Against this backdrop, Schubert's *Die schöne Müllerin* (1823) stands as the most iconic musical setting of Wilhelm Müller's poetry and has been the subject of extensive scholarly inquiry. Researchers such as Susan Youens (1992), Gerald Moore (1975), Charles Rosen (1998), Christopher Howard Gibbs (1997), and Richard Taruskin (2010) have explored this work from multiple perspectives, including its compositional background, the relationship between text and music, stylistic features, and musical morphology. In contrast, Edward Nesbit's *Songs of Sorrow*, as a contemporary work, not only reinterprets musical language but also challenges conventional readings of textual narrative. Currently, there is a notable gap in the academic discourse surrounding this composition. In this study, the author seeks to address this gap by analyzing both the score and the textual framework while also drawing upon direct conversations with the composer to gain insight into Nesbit's creative intent. Unlike conventional notions of musical recomposition or borrowing,

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[2] The description of Edward Nesbit's creative experience and practices in this paper is derived from a talk entitled "Die Schöne Mullerin, Songs of Sorrow, and Unrequited Love at the Mill," given by Edward Nesbit himself at the University of Malaya on December 11, 2023.

Nesbit's work presents a dual challenge, engaging with both musical language and textual narrative in ways that complicate traditional interpretations of the source material. This study, therefore, also offers a fresh perspective on the recomposition of canonical texts within contemporary music.

Problem of Study

It is widely recognized that composers have frequently reworked existing musical material as a means of creating new compositions. Charles Ives, Schoenberg, Stravinsky, and Webern all employed this approach, incorporating past musical elements into their own innovative works[3]. Peter Gregson's *Bach: The Cello Suites* and Max Richter's *Vivaldi: The Four Seasons*, both demonstrate how composers reinterpret classical music to breathe new life. J. Peter Burkholder (Burkholder, 1994) argues that borrowing existing musical material across time and tradition not only helps to clarify a composer's historical positioning but also allows us to distinguish between innovation and continuity within their work. However, current research has primarily focused on the adaptation of musical material, with relatively little attention given to the role of textual narrative in the process of musical recomposition.

Schubert's *Die schöne Müllerin* (1823) is widely regarded as one of the most significant works of German Romantic music. With its intricate musical narrative and delicate emotional expression, the song cycle not only maintains the structural balance characteristic of Classicism but also vividly embodies Romanticism's deep concern for individual emotions and natural scenery. Through this, Schubert successfully transforms Wilhelm Müller's poetic text into a seminal work of Romantic musical storytelling. However, nearly two centuries later, Edward Nesbit's *Songs of Sorrow* revisits the same poetic text from a postmodern perspective, engaging in a creative reinterpretation of

Müller's original narrative. Nesbit not only reconstructs the song cycle's structure but also integrates contemporary musical elements, recontextualizing the work for a modern audience. What inspired Nesbit's reinterpretation? How does his distinctive musical language connect contemporary listeners with the Romantic literary tradition, revitalizing the timeless theme of the miller's journey?

Therefore, this study explores the following questions: How do Schubert's *Die schöne Müllerin* and Nesbit's *Songs of Sorrow*, both based on Wilhelm Müller's poetry, differ in narrative structure and musical transformation? And how does Nesbit's reinterpretation reconstruct musical storytelling to impart new historical and aesthetic significance to the text?

Aim and Significance of Study

To address these questions, this study focuses on three key aspects: (1) the differences in narrative structures between Nesbit and Schubert and how these structural choices shape their musical interpretations of Müller's poetry; (2) the distinct strategies employed in transforming textual narrative into musical narrative and their impact on emotional expression and auditory experience; (3) how both compositions, through their respective musical languages, interpret the central themes of Müller's poetry and imbue them with new significance in their respective historical contexts.

By conducting an in-depth analysis in *Die schöne Müllerin* and *Songs of Sorrow*, this study aims to reveal how Nesbit reconstructs textual and musical narratives to offer a contemporary recomposing of the work within a modern artistic framework. More broadly, this research seeks to explore the ways in which Romantic poetry has been reinterpreted in different historical periods through musical composition, highlighting how music, across temporal boundaries, breathes new life into the same textual material to reflect the evolving spiritual and cultural needs of its time.

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[3] For a discussion of related research, see Burkholder (1994) and Straus (1986).

Methodology

According to Walter Gray (1971), the study of art song must consider text, melody, and accompaniment. The text constitutes one layer, the accompaniment belongs to the musical layer, and the melody serves as a crucial bridge between them. More broadly, art songs integrate text and music, forming a unified expressive medium. This study employs a comparative approach, integrating textual and musical narrative analysis to examine narrative construction in both works, see Figure 1.
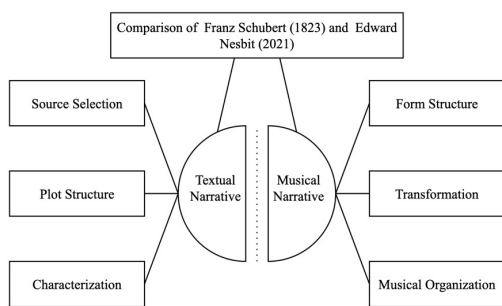

Figure 1. Comparative research design for song cycle analysis

The texts in art songs often serve a strong narrative function, particularly in song cycles, where they shape the storyline and convey characters' emotions. Zbikowski (1999), Rodgers (2014), and BaileyShea (2002) have highlighted the significance of text-music interactions, as well as the role of phrase and sentence structures in musical narrative. Building on Feil & Vollmann's (1988) and Youens' (1992) structural analyses of textual narration in *Die schöne Müllerin*, this study examines textual narrative through three key aspects:

➢ Source Selection: A comparison of the poetic texts in *Die schöne Müllerin* and *Songs of Sorrow* highlights differences in Schubert's and Nesbit's selection and adaptation of Müller's poetry.

➢ Plot Structure: Analyzing the narrative structures of both works reveals how additions or omissions in the storyline influence thematic expression.

➢ Characterization: Examining poetic diction, narrative perspective, and recurring motifs sheds light on character development, with a focus on emotional portrayal and psychological depth.

The narrative function of music has been widely explored in scholarship (Maus, 1991; Nicholls, 2007; Osmond-Smith, 1971; Reyland, 2016). Many scholars (Almén, 2008; Eyre, 2007; Levinson, 2004; Salleh & Razali, 2023) argue that music shares expressive functions with language, realized through musical organization, and advocate a structuralist approach to analysis. Based on this, musical narrative is examined through the following analytical steps:

➢ Form Structure: Analyzing how each composer structures the text musically, including phrase structures, sectional divisions, and overall form in relation to textual divisions.

➢ Transformation from Text to Music: Examining the adaptation of textual elements into musical material, with a focus on melodic contour, harmonic language, and rhythmic treatment. Special attention is given to prosody, word painting, and the reinforcement or transformation of textual meaning.

➢ Musical Organization: Comparing pitch materials, tonal relationships, and other structural elements to reveal the intrinsic logic of musical development and how different musical languages shape narrative across eras and styles.

Results

Section I: Textual Narratives

Source selection and polt structure

In Müller's poetry, a young miller freely wanders along a brook, eventually arriving at a watermill where he encounters the beautiful daughter of the miller and falls deeply in love with her. During his love affair, the miller becomes increasingly blinded and ensnared by fantasies, imagining that his affections are reciprocated. However,

he ultimately realizes that the object of his deep affection has chosen another, a huntsman. As the illusion of love shatters, he becomes overwhelmed by immense sorrow and despair, ultimately succumbing to the brook in an act of self-destruction, carrying with him disappointment in love and resentment towards the huntsman. Müller crafts a variety of intriguing images or entities in the poem, including the miller, the miller's daughter, the huntsman, a brook paralleling the miller's journey, the ever-turning waterwheel, and the flora that serve as vessels for the miller's emotions. The miller engages in constant dialogue with himself or non-living entities, scarcely experiencing genuine interpersonal communication, particularly with the beloved miller maid.

Table 1. The narrative structures of Müller's setting, Schubert's music, and Edward Nesbit's music[4]

Müller's Setting		Schubert	Nesbit	
N/A	No.1 Der Dichter, als Prolog	N/A	N/A	N/A
The miller goes wandering	No.2 Wanderschaft	∫	N/A	Part I: The arrival
	No.3 Wohin?	∫	∫	
	No.4 Halt!	∫	∫	
	No.5 Danksagung an den Bach	∫	N/A	
Life in the mill	No.6 Am Feierabend	∫	N/A	
The awakening of love	No.7 Der Neugierige	∫	∫	
Life in the mill	No.8 Das Mühlenleben	N/A	∫	
His hopes for love's realization	No.9 Ungeduld	∫	∫	Part II: Ambiguous fulfillment
	No.10 Morgengruß	∫	∫	
	No.11 Des Müllers Blumen	∫	N/A	
	No.12 Thränenregen	∫	∫	
The delusion that his love is reciprocated	No.13 Mein!	∫	N/A	
	No.14 Pause	∫	∫	
Before the crisis	No.15 Mit dem grünen Lautenbande	∫	N/A	Part III: Rejection and Death
Hunter's arrival and the miller maid's attraction to him	No.16 Der Jäger	∫	N/A	
	No.17 Eifersucht und Stolz	∫	N/A	
The self-struggle before his despair	No.18 Erster Schmerz, letzter Scherz	N/A	∫	
	No.19 Die liebe Farbe	∫	N/A	
	No.20 Die böse Farbe	∫	N/A	
	No.21 Blümlein Vergißmein	N/A	∫	
The miller's despair and death	No.22 Trockne Blumen	∫	∫	
	No.23 Der Müller und der Bach	∫	∫	
	No.24 Des Baches Wiegenlied	∫	N/A	
N/A	No.25 Der Dichter, als Epilog	N/A	N/A	N/A

[4] It must be noted that this division is also not entirely accurate, as a poem describing everyday life may also imply emotional elements.

Throughout the entire story, *Halt!*, is often regarded as a significant turning point in the plot (Feil & Vollmann, 1988, pp. 45–48). And Youens (1992, p. 32) broadly divides the plot into six parts: Part 1. The miller goes wandering, Part 2. The awakening of love, Part 3. His hopes for love's realization, Part 4. The delusion that his love is reciprocated, Part 5. Hunter's arrival and the miller maid's attraction to him, Part 6. The miller's despair and death (See Table 1).

However, this division, besides providing a rough narrative plot, does not accurately reflect the correspondence between the plot and the poetry. For example, in describing the awakening of the miller's love and the process of fantasizing about love being realized, there is a substantial amount of description of the miller's life at the mill. After the fantasy of love being realized, there is an implication of a crisis in love approaching. Similarly, after describing the relationship between the hunter and the miller maid, the miller's inner emotions begin to move towards despair and death only after undergoing a series of conflicting struggles. Therefore, based on Youens's narrative division, I attempted to add these three parts and establish corresponding relationships with Müller's poetry, as it is beneficial for both narrative considerations and further analysis.

Schubert's textual narrative omits three poems from the original work: *Das Mühlenleben*, *Erster Schmerz, letzter Scherz*, and *Blümlein Vergißmein*. It is evident from the table that this omission has little impact on the plot of the original. Many poems in the original depict mill life, such as *Am Feierabend*, which shares similarities in narrative but is slightly longer. As for *Erster Schmerz, letzter Scherz*, it represents the initial struggle of the heart after the disillusionment of love, with lines like "Willst du den Müller wieder" hinting at the last glimmer of hope. Such inner conflicts are represented in *Die liebe Farbe, Die böse Farbe*, and *Blümlein Vergißmein*

with the same psychological contradictions. Schubert's omission of these three poems may be because they do not alter the original plot of original text. However, it cannot be ruled out that these three poems were omitted due to their length, which may not have suited the composition.

In *Songs of Sorrow*, Edward Nesbit selected twelve poems from the original work and restructured the musical narrative into three parts: Part 1. The arrival, it depicts the miller strolling along the stream and encountering a beautiful miller's maid whom he falls in love with, Part 2. Ambiguous fulfillment, it portrays the miller consumed by his love for the maid, convincing himself that his feelings are reciprocated, Part 3. Rejection and death, the miller's despair and eventual suicide after the miller's maid rejects him (See Table 1).

Nesbit explained his decision not to choose *Am Feierabend*, expressing his attempt to avoid mundane scenes of mill life and instead opting for *Das Mühlenleben* as a supplement to the plot[5]. Additionally, *Wanderschaft* and *Halt!* were excluded, as *Wohin?* could easily replace them to complete the narrative of the stroll. Furthermore, any narrative related to the hunter, including the *poems Die liebe Farbe* and *Die böse Farbe*, was unequivocally excluded. Many poems were also modified for the same purpose. However, apart from repetitive narrative elements and those related to the hunter, most of the original content was inherited to construct the new narrative.

Nesbit's decision was well-founded, as he questioned the necessity of the "hunter" figure when examining the portrayal of the miller's suitors. The role of the "suitor" in mill-related narratives has long been

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[5] "There's another one that Schubert set when the day's work is done which is all about the miller sitting in a barn, I think with the other workers and it's a kind of a mundane scene so I was getting rid of all of that if I could". This content comes from Edward Nesbit's presentation titled "Die Schöne Mullerin, Songs of Sorrow, and Unrequited Love at the Mill" held at the University of Malaya on December 11, 2023.

ambiguous and multifaceted. For instance, in Giuseppe Palomba's libretto for the Italian opera buffa *La Molinara*, the three suitors consist of the nobleman Don Calloandro, the governor Don Rospolone, and the notary Pistofolo (Lazarevich, 2002, p. 1). Additionally, inspired by an *opera buffa* and a French poem, Goethe composed the dialogic poetry cycle *Müllerin-Romanzen* between 1797 and 1798 (Moering, 2008). This cycle consists of four poems: *Der Edelknabe und die Müllerinn*, (*Der Junggesell und der Mühlbach*, *Der Müllerinn Verrath*, and *Der Müllerinn Reue*. In this dialogic poetry cycle, two new suitors emerge—an unidentified nobleman and a solitary traveler lost in unrequited love, who continuously converses with the brook. Notably, the depiction of the solitary traveler and his dialogue with the brook in *Der Junggeselle und der Mühlbach* was seamlessly inherited by Wilhelm Müller. The brook's presence, which plays a crucial role in Goethe's poem, is widely regarded as a key source of inspiration for Müller's later work, manifesting most explicitly in *Der Müller und der Bach* (Youens, 1991).

Nesbit was undoubtedly aware of the polysemy inherent in the concept of the "suitor," as reflected in his introduction to *Songs of Sorrow*:

> *Die schöne Müllerin* is but one manifestation of the story of the miller maid and her suitors, a story which has been told and retold in the German-speaking world over centuries. *Songs of Sorrow* is intended as a modest contribution to that tradition (Nesbit, 2021).

This statement not only acknowledges the long-standing history of the theme but also implies Nesbit's careful consideration of the various narrative adaptations that have emerged over time. Rather than merely replicating the storyline of *Die schöne Müllerin*, Nesbit adopts a more essentialist approach, seeking to return to the spiritual origins of the narrative—namely, Goethe's *Der Junggeselle und der Mühlbach*. In doing

so, he not only reaffirms the central dialogue between the wanderer and the brook but also deliberately minimizes external influences that might disrupt the narrative's introspective essence, thus bringing the work closer to Müller's initial creative vision.

With this perspective, Nesbit completely omits the character of the hunter. This modification not only shifts the narrative focus but also fundamentally alters the audience's perception of the work's thematic core. In *Die schöne Müllerin*, the presence of the hunter heightens the dramatic tension of the love triangle, making jealousy, rivalry, and despair key emotional drivers for the wanderer. In *Songs of Sorrow*, however, the hunter's absence renders the protagonist's emotional turmoil more intrinsic—his loneliness and despair no longer stem from external provocations but rather emerge as a result of self-reflection and an immersive interaction with the brook.

Furthermore, this adaptation enhances the symbolic dimension of *Songs of Sorrow*. The brook functions not only as a listener but also as a mirror reflecting the wanderer's psychological state, thereby establishing a more profound and unmediated connection between the two. This approach imbues the work with a poetic atmosphere more closely aligned with Goethe's original vision and underscores Nesbit's attentiveness to lyricism and symbolism. Therefore, Nesbit's work should not be regarded as a mere adaptation of *Die schöne Müllerin* but rather as a reimagining that, through strategic omissions and modifications, seeks to return to the essence of Goethe's spiritual world, offering a new interpretative framework and internal logic for this classic narrative.

Characterization: the reinforcement and diminishment

In terms of characterization, Schubert chose to use the repetition of the text to enhance the expression of emotion, both within entire stanzas and of specific phrases. Such repetitions may occur at any point within a

stanza, whether at the beginning, middle, or end; however, repetition of the concluding phrase of a stanza is more common. For instance, in *Das Wandern*, Müller's original text is substantially expanded in Schubert's music, from the original five lines of poetry to ten lines (See Example 1).

Müller:	Shchubert:
Das Wandern ist des Müllers Lust, Das Wandern! Das muß ein schlechter Müller sein, Dem niemals fiel das Wandern ein, Das Wandern.	Das Wandern ist des Müllers Lust, Das Wandern! Das Wandern ist des Müllers Lust, Das Wandern! Das muß ein schlechter Müller sein, Dem niemals fiel das Wandern ein, Das Wandern. Das Wandern. Das Wandern. Das Wandern.

Example 1. Müller and Schubert's text in Das Wandern

The repetition creates an image of leisurely strolling through its variations in music. A similar approach can be easily identified in *Des Baches Wiegenlied*, both emblematic of textual repetition. In *Am Feierabend*, Schubert opts to conclude the piece with a complete repetition of the first stanza, forming a recapitulation to create a ternary musical structure. Youens (1992, p. 80) interprets this repetition as evoking a superhuman desire when the beautiful miller's maid bids everyone goodnight with fairness, stirring emotions of both disappointment and yearning.

In Nesbit's work the author sees more content omitted than emphasized. For instance, in *Halt!*, Nesbit omits the final stanza from the original poem, which includes praises for the sun and questions about the brook. In *Das Mühlenleben*, nearly all details describing mill life are omitted, including hints about the hunter's presence and the miller's maid's praise for another worker, retaining only the first two stanzas depicting the miller's maid weaving nets by the brook and gathering flowers and berries in the garden. It appears other people and events in mill life are too mundane, or perhaps Nesbit considered they would interfere with the pure introspection he sought. The omission of the fifth and sixth stanzas in *Thränenregen* is similar; these stanzas describe the brook, sandwiched between scenes depicting the miller's daughter, creating a disjointed feeling. As for the omission of the final stanza in *Pause*, the answer lies in the narrative sequence.

In *Erster Schmerz, letzter Scherz*, where only two stanzas remain out of the original ten, it is clear why six stanzas were omitted—they contained scenes involving the hunter, which evidently should not exist in the new narrative. The third and fourth stanzas depict a static temporal and spatial description parallel to the miller's sadness, imbued with a romantic flavor. The reason for the deletion of these stanzas is unclear. Although the contrast in this temporal and spatial context may seem somewhat uninteresting, it would not have harmed the narrative. *Der Müller und der Bach* represents the miller's final "dialogue" with the brook. Nesbit has expressed his desire for the miller to be the sole singer, not wishing the brook to assume an additional role[6]. Indeed, it can be misconstrued from Schubert's musical work that the brook is a character in the

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[6] "So for almost all of the song cycle the singer is identified with the miller and then suddenly right at the end you're expected to identify the singer with another character which I don't actually find very satisfactory, so I omitted the narration by the brook so that the singer is always the miller." This content comes from Edward Nesbit's presentation titled "Die Schöne Mullerin, Songs of Sorrow, and Unrequited Love at the Mill" held at the University of Malaya on December 11, 2023.

narrative. However, it must be emphasized that this so-called voice of the brook does not exist; its voice should be understood as an auditory hallucination resulting from the miller's extreme sadness. Nesbit recognized that retaining the brook's dialogue could potentially produce a strange character outside of the miller and effortlessly avoided this possibility with the simplest and most effective method.

After a comparison of the choices and treatments made by the two composers reveals that Nesbit employs a strictly first-person narrative perspective in his storytelling, focusing solely on the narrator's experiences, with no extraneous characters or potential dialogues. This approach aligns closely with Müller's theme of the miller's inner thoughts as a "monologue," as asserted in the preface. Youens (1992, p. 31) also comments on this description, stating, "The less we see and hear of the miller maid, the more the miller can worship her, unimpeded by actuality." This observation highlights a prevalent theme in both texts: a sense of self-focus that conveys a solitary and melancholic demeanor. This may also explain why Nesbit chose to use *Songs of Sorrow* as the title for the entire work, intending to express the sadness of the miller rather than that of anyone else. In this context, even the inanimate entities in the poem are imbued with color and change in accordance with the miller's emotional fluctuations. In contrast, Schubert's musical works preserve the roles found in Müller's poetry, including the hunter, the brook, the sky, the plants, and the green ribbon. Notably, in his composition *Der Müller und der Bach*, Schubert directly incorporates dialogues from the poem[7], compelling the performer to navigate a continually shifting narrative perspective.

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[7] Youens also considers this to be a monologue narrated by a single speaker, although Kimball suggests that the brook sings a lullaby for the miller. However, I still interpret it as a hallucination with a deathly undertone, more fitting for a schizophrenic episode. See (Kimball, 2006, p. 64; Youens, 1992, p. 31).

Section II: Musical Narratives

Formal structure: from text to music

In Schubert's work, nearly half of the pieces, nine out of twenty, are presented in the strophic form (See Table 2). Another significant portion of the compositions exhibit a ternary structure, reflecting Schubert's adherence to classical compositional aesthetics of balance. In contrast, at least half of Nesbit's components diverge from traditional musical forms, instead evolving from variations based on common structures, lacking the rectilinear characteristics of traditional structures.

Table 2. Musical form in the works of Schubert and Edward Nesbit

Wilhelm Müller	Franz Schubert	Edward Nesbit
No.1 Der Dichter, als Prolog	N/A	N/A
No.2 Wanderschaft	Strophic	N/A
No.3 Wohin?	Ternary	Ternary*
No.4 Halt!	Ternary	Strophic*
No.5 Danksagung an den Bach	Ternary	N/A
No.6 Am Feierabend	Ternary	N/A
No.7 Der Neugierige	Binary	Binary*
No.8 Das Mühlenleben	N/A	Ternary*
No.9 Ungeduld	Strophic	Strophic*
No.10 Morgengruß	Strophic	Ternary*
No.11 Des Müllers Blumen	Strophic	N/A
No.12 Thränenregen	Strophic	Ternary*
No.13 Mein!	Ternary	N/A
No.14 Pause	Ternary	Binary*
No.15 Mit dem grünen Lautenbande	Strophic	N/A
No.16 Der Jäger	Strophic	N/A
No.17 Eifersucht und Stolz	Ternary	N/A
No.18 Erster Schmerz, letzter Scherz	N/A	Monothematic
No.19 Die liebe Farbe	Strophic	N/A
No.20 Die böse Farbe	Ternary	N/A
No.21 Blümlein Vergißmein	N/A	Ternary
No.22 Trockne Blumen	Binary	Strophic
No.23 Der Müller und der Bach	Ternary	Monothematic
No.24 Des Baches Wiegenlied	Strophic	N/A
No.25 Der Dichter, als Epilog	N/A	N/A

* The variants corresponding to the musical forms

This difference in form structure reflects the difference in composers' understanding of structure. The strophic form has the advantage of simplicity and clarity, which is good for the unity and cohesion of the musical image, but it also has many limitations. The primary challenge lies in the internal structure of each stanza within the text, as they are not strictly equivalent.

Germany	English	T
Guten Morgen, schöne Müllerin!	Good morning, beautiful miller-maid!	A
Wo steckst du gleich das Köpfchen hin,	Why do you so promptly turn your little head,	B
Als wär dir was geschehen?	As if something has happened to you?	B
Verdreiss't dich denn mein Gruss so schwer?	Do you dislike my greetings so profoundly?	B
Verstösst dich denn mein Blick so sehr?	Does my glance disturb you so much?	B
So muss ich wieder gehen.	Then I may go again.	C
O laß mich nur von ferne stehn,	Oh let me only stand from afar,	A
Nach deinem lieben Fenster sehn,	Watching your dear window,	A
Von ferne, ganz von ferne!	From afar, from quite far away!	A
Du blondes Köpfchen, komm hervor!	Your blonde little head, come out!	B
Hervor aus eurem runden Thor,	Come out from your round gate,	B
Ihr blauen Morgensterne!	You blue morning stars!	C

T: Text

Example 2. Textual form of Müller's *Morgengruß*

Nesbit expresses dissatisfaction with Schubert's excessive use of sectional songs, with *Morgengruß* serving as a prime example (See Example 2). In the first stanza, the initial line depicts a scene of the miller greeting the miller maid, constituting the first narrative content of this stanza. This is followed by three consecutive questions, wherein the miller expresses concern that his greeting might cause trouble, reflecting a conflicted inner emotional state, which forms the second narrative content of this stanza. The stanza concludes with "then I must go on again". The second stanza continues the narrative from the first stanza, with the miller temporarily departing and standing at a distance, gazing at the miller maid's window, constituting the first narrative of this stanza. This is followed by his hope to see the miller maid peeking out from the window to look at him. The content of these two stanzas, or all four stanzas, is not entirely identical in structure.

Germany	English	T	T	T
Guten Morgen, schöne Müllerin!	Good morning, beautiful miller-maid!	A	A	A
Wo steckst du gleich das Köpfchen hin,	Why do you so promptly turn your little head,	B	A	B
Als wär dir was geschehen?	As if something has happened to you?	B	A	B
Verdreiss't dich denn mein Gruss so schwer?	Do you dislike my greetings so profoundly?	B	B	B
Verstösst dich denn mein Blick so sehr?	Does my glance disturb you so much?	B	B	B
So muss ich wieder gehen.	Then I may go again.	C	C	C

T: Text, **S:** Schubert, **N:** Nesbit

Example 3. The treatment of text by Franz Schubert and Edward Nesbit in *Morgengruß*

The first stanza of *Morgengruß* as an example (See Example 3), Schubert's music clearly indicates that the first three lines of the poem constitute the first section, blending the greeting and questioning together. It must be acknowledged that there is a distinct difference between the miller's first question and the subsequent two questions. This difference lies in the object of inquiry: the first question, asking

why the miller maid quickly turned her head, can be interpreted as the poet or character expressing surprise or confusion at the miller maid's sudden action. The subsequent two questions, however, involve the miller reflecting on his own behavior. He doubts whether his greeting or gaze might have made the miller maid uncomfortable, reflecting his concern about his role and influence in interacting with her. Therefore, Schubert may have been more concerned with musical structure rather than textual structure during the composition process, leading to this phenomenon. Nesbit noticed this structural issue in the text, choosing to abandon the sectional song form found in Schubert's music and making efforts to align the musical structure with the original text structure in his composition.

Transforming: convert texts into music

Nesbit and Schubert's works overlap in nine pieces, drawing attention to the inevitable similarities or differences in their compositions. Before delving into a more detailed analysis, it's important to clarify the criteria for similarity and difference in this study. Undoubtedly, similarity in composition should not be interpreted as mere copying or replication, and differences should not solely aim for individuality without purpose, as such works would either waste resources or confuse the audience. With the premise of narrative text, a connection is established between the music and the text, and different composers reinterpret the text through their own musical language based on their understanding. In this process of re-narration, there will be some degree of similarity or individual temperament in the depiction of scenes and emotional expressions in the text, resulting in both similarities and distinctions in the compositions. By examining the musical appearances, we can identify similarities or differences between the two, which will better reflect the composers' understanding of the text, rather than simply being completely identical or opposite in meaning.

Figure 2. The texture symbolizing the brook in Franz Schubert and Edward Nesbit's *Wohin?*

After acknowledging this subtle relationship, the analysis can initially focus on those pieces that clearly exhibit similar qualities, such as the contributions of both composers to Müller's *Wohin?* (See Figure 2a and 2b).

Nesbit explicitly stated in his work that the arpeggiated texture in this piece pays homage to Schubert's work, with a plethora of sixteenth notes maintaining nearly identical contours, symbolizing the murmuring of a

brook[8]. It can be safely assumed that when both composers approached the text for their compositions, they reached a consensus at some moment or on some level based on a shared understanding of narrative text and musical language. However, some differences in detail, such as the registers, which cannot be overlooked: Schubert's accompaniment tends to be slightly higher in pitch, lending stability to the G major triad harmony and making the sound of the brook seem lighter and smoother, akin to a shallow stream flowing beside a meadow, exuding a sense of clarity, as described in the poem, "So frisch und wunderhell" (So fresh and wonderfully bright). In contrast, Nesbit's texture contains multiple layers, with the upper A-F#-G trichord forming a passing relationship with the lower C-D, which is obscured, with E-G acting as a bridge and background. This interplay between the melodic patterns creates a sense of vertical space, causing the brook to exhibit some fluctuations and echoes, more closely resembling the depiction of "Wohl aus dem Felsenquell, Hinab zum Thale rauschen" (Surely from the rock spring, rushing down to the valley). This demonstrates the composers' tendencies in selecting the same text and ultimately showcasing their understanding of narrative text and personality through musical forms.

Figure 3. The texture symbolizing the miller in Franz Schubert and Edward Nesbit's *Der Neugierige*

Der Neugierige clearly demonstrates the contrasting attitudes of the two composers (See Figure 3a and 3b). In this passage, Schubert is evidently inspired by the first two lines of the poem, "Ich frage keine Blume" (I ask no flower) and "Ich frage keinen Stern"

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[8] "… the first song of the Songs of Sorrow has those arpeggios which is meant to be water and is a direct reference to the schubert songs in which have that kind of arpeggio, which is represented." This content comes from Edward Nesbit's presentation titled "Die Schöne Mullerin, Songs of Sorrow, and Unrequited Love at the Mill" held at the University of Malaya on December 11, 2023.

(I ask no star), which imply that the miller believes that these elements of nature cannot provide him with the answers he seeks. The miller's assumption that only nature knows the workings of his innermost self and the truth of what happens in the mill, he trusts nothing except the brook. Schubert's music here exhibits a feminine element in the miller, as Youens (1992, p. 33) emphasizes the literary trope of women longing to be noticed by their indifferent lovers, lamenting loudly their pain and begging for their return in a submissive manner. The image of the

miller in the poem is influenced by this feminized perspective, lacking the charm of a masculine figure. Schubert's musical language clearly amplifies this emotion; the marking "Langsam" with a soft expression restrains the display of masculinity, and the melodic strength appears prematurely in the seventh bar, making the longing somewhat subdued in the end. In contrast, Nesbit's music shapes a completely different image, enhancing the miller's masculinity, which appears confident and eager in the light and pulsating melody. The melody in the first two bars is entirely composed of an F major triad, rendering the image of the miller brighter. In the fourth bar, the melody transitions from four repeated sixteenth notes C to F, creating a sense of dynamism with a downward leap of a perfect fifth.

Musical organization: beyond the romanticism

In this section, given the abundance of existing research on Franz Schubert's Die schöne Müllerin (Gibbs, 1997; Moore, 1975; Rosen, 1995; Taruskin, 2010; Youens, 1991, 1992), the analysis focuses solely on the compositional techniques and stylistic features exhibited in Edward Nesbit's musical work, espacially the application of

polytonality and symmetrical set.

As one of the modernist compositional techniques, the polytonality means that the simultaneous presentation of more than two tonalities in a polyphonic texture (Latham, 2002, p. 979; Whittall, 2001). In *Danksagung an den Bach*, this juxtaposition between different tonalities can be observed (See Figure 4). The melody is based on F, with F, B-flat, and C almost entirely comprising the melodic material. In the accompaniment, the piano's two voices distinctly create a tonal juxtaposition, which begins from the first measure of the music. The right hand is unequivocally in F minor, but in the sixth measure, it suddenly shifts to C major, continuing until the tenth measure. The left hand presents a different situation, emphasizing B-flat instead of B, creating a sense of the B-flat Dorian mode, ultimately resolving in the fifth measure. Starting from the sixth measure, the left-hand substitutes A and E for B-flat A and B-flat E, guiding the tonality back to F major.

This situation undergoes some changes in the latter part of the piece: mm. 10-14, there remains a juxtaposition between F harmonic

	1	6	10	15	19
Baritone	F	——	——	F	
Piano R.H.	f	C	f	F	f
Piano L.H.	♭B	F	♭B	F	C

Figure 4. Tonal layers in Edward Nesbit's *Danksagung an den Bach*

minor and the B-flat dorian mode, yet starting from m. 15, the right hand abruptly shifts from F minor to F major, surprisingly supported by the tonality of the left hand, persisting until m. 18. Here, for the first time in the entire music, a complete unity of tonality is achieved. However, this unity does not persist until the end of the piece, as the recapitulation of the main material causes them to quickly differentiate again into the two polymodal musical forms

observed at the beginning. Eventually, the left hand unexpectedly ends on C instead of B-flat, leaning towards the C Phrygian mode in terms of tonality. However, collecting all the tonalities that have appeared, it could be observed that F, B-flat, and C happen to comprise almost all the melodic material throughout the piece.

Since the 20th century, composers have extensively used pitch sets other than

Figure 5. The melody structure of Edward Nesbit's *Thränenregen*

diatonic scales in their compositions. These pitch collections may have already existed or could have been created by the composers themselves (Kostka & Santa, 2018, p. 17). A symmetrical set is a set that can map onto itself under transposition or inversion (Roig-Francolí, 2021, pp. 102–110; Straus, 2016, pp. 107–112). Although the use of symmetrical sets may not necessarily have been the composer's original intent, the discovery of Edward Nesbit's use of pitch material revealed a peculiar phenomenon, which has been retained as part of the analysis. The melody of *Thränenregen* reveals the structure of the work (See Figure 5). *Thränenregen* is a piece with a ternary structure, where, in addition to the melodies of sections A and B listed in the figure, the material of section A is repeated at the end.
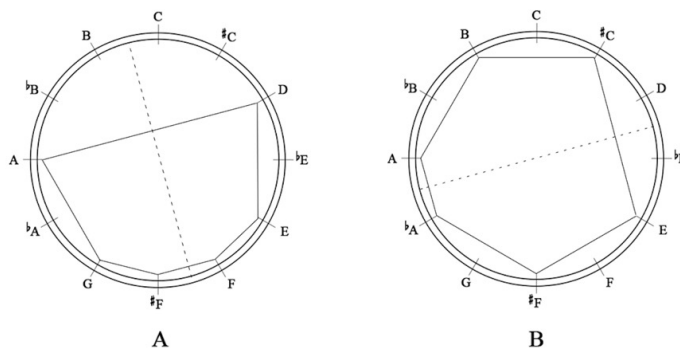

Figure 6. Symmetric scales in Edward Nesbit's *Thränenregen*

The variation in motifs indeed serves as a distinguishing feature between the A and B sections; however, unlike the changes in tonality typical of traditional music, this does not inherently indicate their independence. Upon closer examination of the musical material, we observe that the pitch content in section A comprises a symmetrical hexachord: D-E-F-F#-G-A; similarly, the pitch content in section B, E-F#-G#-A-B-C#, also forms a symmetrical hexachord. Notably, the symmetry axes of these two symmetrical scales lie between the pitches (See Figure 6).

Discussion

The attitudes of Edward Nesbit and Franz Schubert towards Wilhelm Müller's texts reflect the complex relationship between music and text. Should music composition

respect the text, or should the music take precedence? Undoubtedly, composers' sensibility could initially find resonance with the poet, serving as the prerequisite for transforming text into music. In this transformative process, Nesbit made significant reductions to Müller's texts, whereas Schubert's chosen poems retained almost all their original lines, with only some repetitions. Does this indicate that Schubert's musical compositions respect Müller's original text more? Certainly, Nesbit himself acknowledged that such reductions might be seen as disrespectful to the poetry, especially the omissions related to the huntsman, daily life, and certain stanzas[4]. Yet, Schubert's use of strophic song forms, despite differing poetic structures, often simplifies Müller's texts in a manner that can be perceived as making them more passive[5]. For Nesbit, actions that make musical narrative more ideal are justified, and Schubert likely would not compromise a satisfying melody for the sake of textual structure.

In fact, the relationship between music and text in songs has long been a central topic of discussion. Some scholars argue that the music in songs often swallows those important elements initially present in the text, marginalizing them to a certain extent (Cone, 1992, p. 184; Langer, 1953, p. 152; Rodgers, 2017). However, Randall Thompson, Citkowitz, and Louis Gruenberg have also emphasized the importance of adhering to poetry without sacrificing musical form, advocating for adjustments based on the musical form (Upton, 1938).

Schubert adhered to Müller's narrative from the outset, telling a traditional German folk story. In contrast, Nesbit sought to achieve simplicity, modernity, and a distinct creative space within his music, projecting Müller's poetic text through the lens of modernist musical language while simultaneously reflecting the spiritual tradition of Goethe's more concise poetry.

Conclusion

A comparative study of Edward Nesbit's *Songs of Sorrow* and Franz Schubert's *Die schöne Müllerin* reveals that, despite sharing the same poetic text, the two composers adopt fundamentally different approaches to textual narration and musical expression. These differences manifest primarily in two key aspects:

Divergent Treatment of the Poetic Text

Unlike Schubert's *Die schöne Müllerin*, which preserves the structure and integrity of Wilhelm Müller's poetry, Nesbit's *Songs of Sorrow* omits certain key characters and passages, significantly reconstructing the original narrative framework. This adaptation not only reflects Nesbit's personal artistic vision but also signals a return to the spiritual world of Goethe's *Der Junggeselle und der Mühlbach*. In this reimagining, Nesbit removes the figure of the hunter, simplifying the narrative relationships and shifting the dramatic focus entirely onto the emotional interplay between the miller and the miller's daughter. This revision also has a profound impact on the characterization and psychological depth of the figures in the story. By eliminating the element of external rivalry, Nesbit presents the miller's unrequited love as an intense yet singularly obsessive emotion, free from the resentment and bitterness that arise in Schubert's setting. In Schubert's interpretation, the protagonist's emotional turmoil is heightened by jealousy, culminating in a tragic descent shaped by both internal despair and external conflict. In contrast, Nesbit's protagonist undergoes a more introspective transformation, wherein sorrow is a product

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[9] "So, in any way that the text is just to keep the vehicle to the mood that you're trying to capture in a way, right exactly, instead of the specific words to and in that… Anything that seems too mundane I just cut out, so I wasn't respecting the poetry in that sense, I was quite happy to reshape the individual poems to meet what I wanted to do." This content comes from Edward Nesbit's presentation titled "Die Schöne Mullerin, Songs of Sorrow, and Unrequited Love at the Mill" held at the University of Malaya on December 11, 2023.

[10] John Reed addressed Richard Capell's critique of strophic songs, asserting that such simplicity could also represent a form of greatness, See (Reed, 1978, p. 419).

of internal emotional exhaustion rather than relational antagonism.

Furthermore, this adaptation reconfigures the role of the miller's daughter. No longer positioned as an active agent making choices between competing suitors, she becomes an abstract entity—less a concrete character and more a projection of the protagonist's emotional state. In this sense, *Songs of Sorrow* does not rely on narrative tension to drive the story forward; instead, it focuses on the gradual intensification and refinement of emotional expression, crafting a more introspective and psychologically nuanced portrait of love and loss.

Contrasting Approaches to Musical Narration

Beyond textual adaptation, Nesbit and Schubert also diverge significantly in their musical narration, though moments of convergence can be observed. In *Der Müller und der Bach*, both composers employ harmonic repetition to evoke a sense of stagnation and inescapable sorrow. However, in *Der Neugierige*, Nesbit's miller is musically rendered with a greater degree of assertiveness and resilience, exuding a distinctly more masculine character compared to Schubert's interpretation. Likewise, in *Wohin*, both composers utilize arpeggiated textures to depict the flowing water, but with differing emphases: Schubert's music conveys the clarity and serenity of a gentle stream, whereas Nesbit's composition captures the dynamic and layered movement of water cascading through a mountainous valley.

These musical similarities and differences reveal both a shared interpretative sensibility and the distinct artistic priorities of each composer. While both engage with Müller's text in ways that reflect their respective musical languages, their aesthetic choices ultimately shape divergent expressive outcomes. Schubert's *Die schöne Müllerin* constructs its musical narrative within a Classical-Romantic tonal framework, characterized by fluid melodic lines and rich harmonic progressions that prioritize emotional continuity and natural expressivity. In contrast, Nesbit's *Songs of Sorrow* integrates modernist compositional techniques—such as linear counterpoint, polytonality, and symmetrical scales—alongside traditional formal and tonal elements, resulting in a more eclectic and exploratory sound world. This contrast not only differentiates the auditory experiences of the two works but also underscores how compositional style influences the construction of musical meaning.

As a conclusion, Wilhelm Müller's poetry finds two distinct musical realizations in the works of Schubert and Nesbit, each shaped by the stylistic and aesthetic concerns of its respective historical period. Schubert's *Die schöne Müllerin* stands as a quintessential example of Romantic music, embodying the era's fascination with nature, individual sentiment, and the complexities of human emotion. Through its lyrical melodies and sensitive harmonic treatment, the song cycle encapsulates the Romantic ethos of deep engagement with personal and natural worlds. Nesbit's *Songs of Sorrow*, by contrast, reimagines both the textual and musical narrative structure, departing from Schubert's established framework while drawing inspiration from Goethe. By incorporating modernist musical language and reconstructing the poetic narrative, Nesbit not only challenges conventional expectations but also offers a renewed interpretative space for Müller's text. His composition merges contemporary harmonic and textural innovations with an introspective, symbolic approach to storytelling, ultimately creating a more abstract and psychologically immersive experience. This conclusion illustrates how composers from different historical periods reinterpret a common textual source through their own musical idioms. Schubert, within the Romantic tradition, emphasizes melody and harmony to articulate an emotional and narrative arc, while Nesbit

employs modernist techniques to craft a musical landscape that is both structurally innovative and thematically introspective. This contrast not only highlights the diversity of musical storytelling but also offers broader insights into the processes of textual reimagination and stylistic evolution in art song composition.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Further Research

This study opens avenues for further exploration into the interpretative and adaptive strategies composers use when engaging with Romantic poetry. Future research could examine additional adaptations of *Die schöne Müllerin* by other composers, including those from diverse musical traditions and genres, to highlight how narrative and musical techniques evolve in response to cultural and historical shifts. Moreover, a comparative analysis of text-to-music transformations in non-Western adaptations of Müller's poetry could provide insight into how global musical idioms reshape Romantic texts.

Another promising direction would involve listener perception studies focused on Schubert's and Nesbit's works, exploring how modern audiences interpret and emotionally connect with each composer's treatment of the text. A mixed-methods approach incorporating both analytical and reception-focused methodologies could offer a holistic view of the interpretative impact of different musical settings on audiences over time.

Recommendations for Applicants

Applicants interested in this field are encouraged to develop a strong foundation in musicological analysis, particularly in textual and narrative analysis, to effectively engage with the unique intersections of music and poetry. Familiarity with comparative analysis techniques and historical research skills would be beneficial in exploring the thematic and stylistic evolutions of song cycles across eras. Additionally, applicants with knowledge in interdisciplinary methods, such as combining music theory with cultural studies or reception theory, may find these tools advantageous in uncovering nuanced interpretations of works like *Die schöne Müllerin*. A proactive approach to exploring both Romantic and contemporary musical idioms will also enable applicants to make meaningful contributions to the field of music analysis.

Limitations of Study

This study is limited by its focus on two specific adaptations of *Die schöne Müllerin*, restricting a broader examination of the song cycle genre across different composers and time periods. By centering on Schubert's and Nesbit's works, the analysis may overlook other stylistic nuances, and compositional approaches present in alternative adaptations of Müller's poetry.

Also, this research primarily employs textual and musical narrative analysis, which may limit its perspective on the broader reception and performance practices of these works. Audience reception and interpretive practices across diverse cultural settings, which could add further insight into each work's impact, were not within the scope of this study.

Finally, this study does not account for the influence of live performance or varying interpretations by performers, factors that significantly contribute to the experiential aspect of song cycles. As each performer brings their own interpretative nuances to these compositions, future studies could incorporate performance analysis to explore how interpretive choices influence the reception and understanding of these works.

Acknowledgement

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Biodata of Authors

Xuewei Chang is a Ph. D candidate at the Faculty of Creative Arts, University of Malaya, focusing on music composition and Western music history. With a bachelor's degree in Musicology at Beihua University and a Master's in the Art of Music Composition at the Henan University. He joined the University in October 2022 under the mentorship of Dr. Marzelan Salleh to delve into theoretical aspects of music composition and musicology.

Affiliation: Department of Music, Faculty of Creative Arts, University of Malaya, Malaysia.
Email: s2164294@siswa.um.edu
ORCID: 0009-0005-0808-5701

Marzelan Salleh is a senior lecturer at the Department of Music, Faculty of Creative Arts, University of Malaya. He received his Ph. D in Composition from the University of Bristol under the supervisionof Prof. Dr. Michael Ellison and previously did his master's in composition at the University of Salford with Prof. Alan Williams. His music such as Bani Jawi, Bangkit, Puteri Gunung Ledang, Rukun, Hijrah, and Tarian Cinta have been inspired by contemporary music methods deriving from diverse nuances of Asian music. Marzelan Salleh has attended composition workshops and masterclasses by renowned composers and musicians such as Pierre Boulez, Sir Peter Maxwell Davies, John Pickard, Trevor Wishart, Philip Glass, and Nigel Clarke. His music has been performed in United Kingdom and Malaysia alongside composers such as John Pickard, Michael Ellison, and Dieter Mack. Performances of his compositions at major international music festivals and concerts include New Music in the Southwest, Bristol New Music Festival, Contemporary Music Venture Concert Series and University of Bristol's New Music Ensemble Concerts.

Affiliation: Department of Music, Faculty of Creative Arts, University of Malaya, Malaysia.
Email: marzelan@um.edu.my
ORCID: 0000-0001-6655-1305
Personal web site: https://umexpert.um.edu.my/marzelan
Research Gate: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Marzelan-Salleh
AcademiaEdu: https://independent.academia.edu/MarzelanSalleh
Google Scholar: https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=yEZajEYAAAAJ&hl=en