

Frauenliebe und Leben:

Robert Schumann's Self-
Fulfilling Prophecy

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Abstract

The basis of this research paper is the work of Robert Schumann, particularly his lieder cycle *Frauenliebe und Leben*, and how it predicted the conditions and events of Robert and Clara Schumann's marriage.

I will discuss Schumann's composition of *Frauenliebe und Leben* in the context of his relationship with Clara. I will also analyze Chamisso's poetry and Schumann's decision to use it in this cycle. The process of Robert and Clara marrying was particularly difficult because of Clara's father, and I will study their correspondence around the time of *Frauenliebe und Leben*'s composition to further my understanding of the situation as a whole.

In terms of their work post-marriage I will discuss Clara's transformation from a musician to a wife and mother; while she still composed and performed, she was forced to be mainly a wife, a mother, and an admirer of Robert's work.. Some emphasis will be given to gender roles in nineteenth-century German marriages, which was illustrated both through the texts used in *Frauenliebe und Leben* and in Clara's role in the Schumann household.

I am interested in this topic because I am learning the *Frauenliebe und Leben* cycle for my upcoming voice recital and I want to learn more about it. I also am fascinated with the idea of two active composers marrying and having a family together. My goal with this research paper is to gain a deep understanding of the song cycle as a whole and grasp its place in Robert and Clara Schumann's lives and compositions.

Frauenliebe und Leben: Robert Schumann's self-fulfilling prophecy

1840 was an eventful year in the life of Leipzig-based composer Robert Schumann. Dubbed "the Year of Song," a vast majority of his compositions of this year were Lieder, often on the topic of love and marriage. Coincidentally, 1840 was also the year in which Robert married Clara Wieck after opposing her father in court in order to receive her hand in marriage. Because these two important ideas overlapped, many of Schumann's Lieder relate directly to his marriage. His choice of poetry idealized that generation's view of women: they were treated as child-bearers, child-raisers, housekeepers, and servants of their husbands. Robert Schumann exemplifies this societal stance in *Frauenliebe und Leben*, or "A Woman's Life and Love."

Schumann composed this cycle in July of 1840, just two months before his and Clara's wedding, and soon after their wedding Clara found herself abandoning her life as a composer in favor of becoming a devoted wife. This cycle, which chronicles a woman's life as a lover, wife, and mother, held great personal significance for Robert, who was nearing the end of a legal battle against Friedrich Wieck for Clara's hand in marriage¹. With all of the cultural parallels present, Robert's decision to set this particular set of poems to song, especially so close to his marriage, shows that he shared the same ideas of women promoted by nineteenth-century German culture. Therefore, *Frauenliebe und Leben* ultimately served as a self-fulfilling prophecy, accurately predicting the dynamics of the Schumanns' marriage and Clara's success as a musician.

¹ Joan Chissell, *Clara Schumann, a Dedicated Spirit: A Study of Her Life and Work* (London: H. Hamilton, 1983), 72.

The text of *Frauenliebe und Leben* comes from a set of poems by Aldebert von Chamisso, a Berlin-based nineteenth-century poet and writer known for his writings about the German middle class². Chamisso's goal with *Frauenliebe*, as with much of his other work, was to represent middle-class German women of the mid-nineteenth century. It was the first of the five poem cycles Chamisso published in under two years that related directly to the dynamics of marriage and family life.³ His views of women at the time were similar to the common belief that women were the property and subordinates of their husbands. In his *Lebenslieder und Bilder*, Chamisso chooses to have the husband in the story refer to his wife as "mein süßes Eigentum," translated to "my sweet property or possession,"⁴ which furthered the idea that women were to be submissive to their spouses. Rufus Hallmark states that this poetic cycle "embodies the age's stereotyped conception of womanhood as subservient wife and mother,"⁵ and he is not the only scholar to hold this sentiment. Jack M. Stein of Harvard refers to Chamisso's poems as "mediocre," though he describes Schumann's setting of it as his "greatest achievement in song."⁶ Elissa S. Guralnick states, quite simply, "Glorious music, ridiculous words."⁷ Though this cycle was not particularly well-received, it was set sixty times in the nineteenth century alone,⁸ three of those times occurring within a year of the cycle's creation.⁹

² Rufus E. Hallmark, *Frauenliebe Und Leben: Chamisso's Poems and Schumann's Songs* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 7.

³ Rufus E. Hallmark, *Frauenliebe Und Leben: Chamisso's Poems and Schumann's Songs* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 111.

⁴ Hallmark, *Frauenliebe Und Leben*, 12.

⁵ Rufus E. Hallmark, *German Lieder in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1996), 79.

⁶ Jack M. Stein, *Poem and Music in the German Lied from Gluck to Hugo Wolf* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1971), 119.

⁷ Elissa S. Guralnick, "'Ah Clara, I Am Not Worthy of Your Love': Rereading 'Frauenliebe Und Leben', the Poetry and the Music" (*Music & Letters* 87 (4). Oxford University Press: 580–605, 2006), 580.

⁸ Hallmark, *Frauenliebe Und Leben*, 239-40.

⁹ Hallmark, *Frauenliebe Und Leben*, 111.

Schumann's setting of *Frauenliebe und Leben* utilizes eight of the nine poems Chamisso originally wrote for the cycle, each corresponding to pivotal moments in a young woman's life. The first song, titled *Seit ich ihn gesehen* (or "When I first saw him"), is a simple and quaint beginning to the cycle, telling of the woman's first contact with the man she loves. Schumann utilizes simple, approachable rhythms in both the vocal line and the piano accompaniment, both of which highlight his idea of a demure and lowly young

1.



Larghetto.

Seit ich ihn ge - se - hen, glaub' ich blind zu sein;

Figure 1

woman.¹⁰ The simple and delicate piano accompaniment depicts the bare wonder involved in first loves, as seen

in Figure 1¹¹. The first line of text, translated to English, states, "Since I first saw him, I believe myself blind,¹²" which conveys her sense of awe at coming across a man so majestic. The second stanza states, "Otherwise everything around me is without light and color, Playing games with my sisters is no longer my desire...,¹³" implying that though she hardly knew this man, who had so quickly gained her love, she was ready to abandon the life she knew already. Schumann's placement of a *ritard* over "begehr' ich mehr" (... is no longer my desire) suggests a resignation toward a life without her newfound love.

The end of *Seit ich ihn gesehen* is abruptly met with the blocky and majestic introduction to *Er, der Herrlichste von Allen*. Translated to "He, the most marvelous of all," this song is a continuation of the infatuation found in the previous song, portraying the object of the woman's affection as marvelous and worthy of the best in life. Described as a

¹⁰ Gerald Moore, *Poet's Love: The Songs and Cycles of Schumann* (New York: Taplinger Pub., 1981), 25.

¹¹ Robert Schumann. *Frauenliebe und Leben*, Op. 42. Leipzig: Verlag von Breitkopf & Härtel, 1885.

¹² Hallmark, *Frauenliebe Und Leben*, 242.

¹³ Hallmark, *Frauenliebe Und Lebe*, 242.

“protestation of love,¹⁴” this song serves as a bolder and unrestrained declaration of the woman’s affection toward the man she hardly knows. Over the course of the song, Chamisso frequently references Heaven and prayers, implying an almost worshipful



Figure 2

Schumann’s usage of rhythmically driven melody and accompaniment, as well as the tendency to dwell on arpeggiation of the tonic E-flat chord in the voice. His use of constant chords in the accompaniment, pictured in Figure 2, depict the idea of strength and masculinity, serving as a steady counterpart to the whimsical and overly romantic text¹⁶.

Ich kann’s nicht fassen, nicht glauben takes on a much more frenzied tone, as the



Figure 3

the first song, as the woman insists she must be dreaming of the man loving her in return.

The accompaniment to this song is heavily punctuated, emphasizing important notes and

admiration of the man.

Elissa S. Guralnick

describes the woman’s

voice in this poem as

having “ample strength of

character,”¹⁵ which is

particularly evident in

woman has now learned

that the man loves her as

well. Chamisso brings back

the idea of the “dream” from

¹⁴ Gerald Moore, *Poet's Love: The Songs and Cycles of Schumann* (New York: Taplinger Pub., 1981), 25.

¹⁵ Elissa S. Guralnick, “‘Ah Clara, I Am Not Worthy of Your Love’: Rereading ‘Frauenliebe Und Leben’, the Poetry and the Music” (*Music & Letters* 87 (4). Oxford University Press: 580–605, 2006), 580.

¹⁶ Schumann, *Frauenliebe und Leben*.

words (see Figure 3¹⁷). Schumann utilized vocal ornaments and ritardandos to highlight important words and phrases, such as *berückt* (meaning “beguiled”) and *Es kann ja nimmer so sein* (meaning “It cannot ever be so”).¹⁸ He ends the song with a Picardy Third, which in this case is a simple C Major chord, reflecting the woman’s simple innocence.

Du Ring an meinem Finger is a celebration of the woman’s newfound engagement to

Nach und nach rascher.

Le - bens un - end - li - chen, tie - fen Werth. Ich will ihm die - nen, ihm le - ben, ihm

an - ge - hö - ren ganz, hin sel - ber mich ge - ben und fin - den verklärt mich, und

fin - den verklärt mich in sei - nem Glanz. Du Ring an mei - nem Fin - ger, mein gol - des Rin - ge -

Figure 4

the man she loves so dearly. Regarded by some critics as “strictly sentimental,”¹⁹ this is the most widely-recognized song from the cycle. This song is much more harmonically straightforward than the others, as it stays within

standard chord structures and progressions, utilizing subtle and easily-flowing chromaticism for variety, as seen in Figure 4²⁰. Schumann chose to mirror the melody in the accompaniment in order to add extra emphasis to the sweet and relatively simple melody, as seen in Figure 3²¹. Rufus Hallmark describes the fourth stanza of this poem as “the most sexist” and also “the most sexual” passages in the entire cycle²². It reads:

¹⁷ Schumann, *Frauenliebe und Leben*.

¹⁸ Hallmark, *Frauenliebe Und Leben*, 243.

¹⁹ Gerald Moore, *Poet's Love: The Songs and Cycles of Schumann* (New York: Taplinger Pub., 1981), 29.

²⁰ Schumann, *Frauenliebe und Leben*.

²¹ Schumann, *Frauenliebe und Leben*.

²² Hallmark, *Frauenliebe Und Leben*, 200.

"I shall serve him, live for him,
 Belong myself wholly to him,
 Give myself over to him and find
 Myself transfigured by his light.²³"

The socially problematic portion is the first two lines, in which the woman expresses her desire to serve and belong to the man. The idea of serving and belonging to a man is directly concurrent with the cultural ideas of the time, it has lost cultural relevance with the progress of women's rights and gender equality in Western culture. The potentially erotic portion is the second half of the stanza, which implies the woman's longing to be physically intimate with her lover. In a time where a woman's sexual desires were considered a lower priority than those of her husband, Chamisso's choice to include this innuendo was quite bold. Schumann reflected Chamisso's boldness by making this stanza musically different from the others: in contrast to the pleasant and predictable movement in the beginning, with simple E-flat harmonic progression and light accompaniment, this section picks up in tempo, incorporating large leaps in the vocal line and the same constant chords found in the accompaniment of *Er, der Herrlichste von Allen*.

Helft mir, ihr Schwestern, characterized by its nervous energy and loyalty to the tonic chord, chronicles the woman's "excitement and timid anticipation²⁴" while getting ready for her wedding and enlisting her sisters for help. This song in particular is heavy in symbolism: Gerald Moore hypothesized that "arching arpeggios seem to signify the graceful curves of the bride's train,²⁵ while Elissa S. Guralnick decided that the "throbbing in the

²³ Hallmark, *Frauenliebe Und Leben*, 244.

²⁴ Jack M. Stein, *Poem and Music in the German Lied from Gluck to Hugo Wolf* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1971), 120.

²⁵ Gerald Moore, *Poet's Love: The Songs and Cycles of Schumann* (New York: Taplinger Pub., 1981), 31.

treble... bespeaks [the man's] persistent apprehension.²⁶ Rufus Hallmark cites Schumann's setting of this poem as having "overall psychological aptness as an expression of the bride's



Figure 5

playing as the woman walked down the aisle.

nervous tension,²⁷ which is evident in the frenzied and frantic text and tempo²⁸. This song ends with a regal and confident march, meant to resemble the wedding march

The next song, *Süßer Freund*, chronicles the woman telling her husband that she is

6.



Figure 6

expecting his child.

Chamisso's word

choice in this song

particularly implies a

sort of emancipation on behalf of the woman; since she is to mother a child, the woman now feels like she is her own person.²⁹ Schumann offers a humble and yet again sparse accompaniment paired with a heavily dotted vocal line characterized by a diminished fourth interval, seen in Figure 6³⁰. In Schumann's setting he chose to leave out the third stanza of Chamisso's original poem, which told of the woman learning about motherhood

²⁶ Elissa S. Guralnick, "Ah Clara, I Am Not Worthy of Your Love': Rereading 'Frauenliebe Und Leben', the Poetry and the Music" (Music & Letters 87 (4). Oxford University Press: 580-605, 2006), 598.

²⁷ Hallmark, *Frauenliebe Und Leben*, 211.

²⁸ Schumann, *Frauenliebe und Leben*.

²⁹ Elissa S. Guralnick, "Ah Clara, I Am Not Worthy of Your Love': Rereading 'Frauenliebe Und Leben', the Poetry and the Music" (Music & Letters 87 (4). Oxford University Press: 580-605, 2006), 583.

³⁰ Schumann, *Frauenliebe und Leben*.

from her own mother.³¹ There are many possible explanations for this omission, one being that Schumann simply did not want the melody to become overly repetitive. Another idea is that he left out this particular stanza because it did not involve the man directly.

The delicate ending to *Süßer Freund* is quickly replaced with the sweeping arpeggiation and jolly melody of *An meinem Herzen*, in which the woman and her husband rejoice in the birth of their child. Described as “the one jubilant song in the cycle,³²” this song portrays the mother’s pure joy in becoming a mother. Toward the end Chamisso wrote “Oh, how I pity the man who cannot feel a mother’s bliss!³³” which shows that the woman now feels even more independent and confident on her own.

Unfortunately for the protagonist, the jubilation of the previous song is fleeting. In *Nun hast du mir den ersten Schmerz getan*, the final song in Schumann’s cycle, tells of the



Figure 7

first sadness the woman’s husband has caused her: he has fallen into “the sleep of death.³⁴” However,

Guralnick suggests that the husband is not in fact dead, as the accompaniment suggests the husband is still present.³⁵ This solemn yet angry song ends with a duplication of the first song’s accompaniment (see Figure 7³⁶), which stands for the woman’s reminiscing of the first time she saw her now gone husband.

³¹ Hallmark, *Frauenliebe Und Leben*, 215.

³² Elissa S. Guralnick, “‘Ah Clara, I Am Not Worthy of Your Love’: Rereading ‘Frauenliebe Und Leben’, the Poetry and the Music” (Music & Letters 87 (4). Oxford University Press: 580–605, 2006), 600.

³³ Hallmark, *Frauenliebe Und Leben*, 247.

³⁴ Hallmark, *Frauenliebe Und Leben*, 247.

³⁵ Elissa S. Guralnick, “‘Ah Clara, I Am Not Worthy of Your Love’: Rereading ‘Frauenliebe Und Leben’, the Poetry and the Music” (Music & Letters 87 (4). Oxford University Press: 580–605, 2006), 601.

³⁶ Schumann, *Frauenliebe und Leben*.

In terms of the marriage of Robert and Clara Schumann, this cycle foreshadowed many of the circumstances in their marriage. For instance, Clara did “give herself fully to him,” as stated in Song 4, by setting her compositional and artistic career aside in favor of Robert’s. The frenzied ideas present in *Ich kann’s nicht fassen, nicht glauben* and *Helft mir, ihr Schwestern* represent the stressful process of Robert and Clara’s marriage, which was by no means easy.

Most importantly, the last song and its ending are a direct parallel to Clara’s life after Robert’s insanity and death: just like the ending to the cycle is a replication of the beginning of the work, Clara’s life after Robert was characterized by immense success as a musician, success that she was unable to attain while placing her career second to Robert’s. In fact, shortly after Robert’s funeral, Clara started placing her children at a lower priority than her music. Within three months of his death, Clara had placed two of her children in boarding school and left the two youngest with a housekeeper while she embarked on a concert tour³⁷. While her success as a musician continued to grow and she began once again to develop her own identity as a musician, she *Frauenliebe und Leben* not only predicted many conditions of the Schumanns’ marriage, it also perpetuated the cultural norms that prevented women in nineteenth-century Germany from pursuing their skills and passions.

³⁷ Nancy B. Reich, *Clara Schumann, the Artist and the Woman* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press), 136.

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