



Review of Susan Wollenberg, *Schubert's Fingerprints: Studies in the Instrumental Works* (Ashgate, 2011)

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[1] Susan Wollenberg points out that, in 1988, Elmar Budde posed the following question about Schubert's music: "Where, aside from all beauty, lies the compositional essence? The question remains mostly unanswered" (9). Budde himself went on to preserve the unanswered state of that question by reasserting a common belief that Schubert's music was primarily to be enjoyed, not understood: "One enjoys the beauty . . . why should one wish to understand what one enjoys?" (quoted by Wollenberg on page 9). By contrast, Wollenberg seeks to answer Budde's initial question and proposes that Schubert's compositional essence lies in eight "fingerprints," each of which makes up a chapter in the book. As Wollenberg herself explains (9), the fingerprints she discusses are all familiar to Schubert scholars; the ambition of her book is to bring them all together in the first book-length study of them. Despite the emphasis on the instrumental music suggested by the title of her book, it turns out that knowledge of Schubert's song technique is crucial to understanding this compositional essence, for a running thread in Wollenberg's argument is that if, as it were, we dust for prints, the hand that controls the fingerprints in the instrumental music belongs to Schubert the song writer.

[2] After an introductory chapter, the first three chapters are structured as if they unfold in sonata form. Chapter 2 ("His Favourite Device": Schubert's Major–Minor Usage and its Nuances") explores Schubert's characteristic use of major–minor mixture, a fingerprint that often surfaces at the beginning of Schubert's works and opens up tonal space, introducing chromaticism that is explored later in a movement or work. She begins with a look back at Eric Blom's (1928) study of Schubert's "favourite device," where he observed that it was used in the songs as a means of expressing binary oppositions or mixed emotions. Through copious use of examples from the sonata-form repertoire and beyond, Wollenberg concludes that Robert Winter's epithet about the songs—"Along with Brahms, [Schubert] ranks as the greatest major–minor colourist in Western music"—must surely also apply to the instrumental music (quoted on page 46).

[3] Chapter 3 ("Poetic Transitions") builds on Wollenberg's previous research, where she provided a taxonomy of Schubert's transitional strategies and a history of their development within Schubert's oeuvre.⁽¹⁾ In her 1998 study, she seems to have made a distinction between "magical" and "poetic" transitions, a distinction which no longer holds in the volume under

review (or in her 2007 study), despite the fact that she refers frequently to the earlier taxonomy. Some clarification is therefore in order. Her initial definition of a “poetic” transition came in the wake of defining four approaches to the transition section as a whole: how Schubert would leave the tonic and approach the new key. He may (1) appear to be “losing his way” and make multiple attempts towards the new key; (2) move to the new key “decisively and unproblematically”; (3) hesitate en route, possibly for rhetorical effect; or (4) employ the poetic type, where “the transitional move is effected almost unobserved, drawing the minimum of attention to itself” (Wollenberg 1998, 45).

[4] If the poetic type is imperceptible, the “magical” transitions are the sudden or surprising ones. Wollenberg identified five such strategies. The first two are both labeled “false” transitions, which either (1) set up a Classical key only to introduce an unexpected one in the second theme or (2) set up an unexpected key only to introduce the expected one. The first movements of Quintet in C Major, D. 965 and Quartet in G Major, D. 887 respectively are examples of these. The third type involves the entry of a key—conventional or otherwise—that is prepared by its own dominant but its sudden arrival creates the surprise; Wollenberg’s example is the entry into the A \flat theme of the *Quartettssatz*, D. 703. The fourth type involves a “totally unpredictable route,” of which the move into F \sharp minor in measure 48 of the Sonata in B-flat Major, D. 960 is an example. The final type is one where no new key is prepared, but the secondary theme enters in a new key after a quick shift to the new key; the first movements of Symphonies No. 8 (“Unfinished”) and No. 9 (“Great”) are examples. (2)

[5] In the book (and in her 2007 study), “poetic” now seems to refer to changes of key inspired by the songs, in which innumerable methods of modulation are found. Therefore the imperceptible poetic type, plus all of the surprising magical types, now fall under the rubric of Schubert’s poetic transitions. Although there is room for greater clarity in Wollenberg’s taxonomy, her analyses of both well-known and lesser-studied works are an important contribution to recent scholarship on the so-called MC (“medial caesura”) or strategies of caesura-fill that Hepokoski and Darcy’s (2006) *Elements of Sonata Theory* has inspired. Furthermore, Wollenberg takes Schubert’s transition types beyond the realm of sonata form and characterizes the rhetoric of such moves in his episodic forms too.

[6] Chapter 4 (“Schubert’s Second Themes”) naturally follows suit from the chapter on transitions. It is also one of three chapters—or fingerprints—that scrutinizes Schubert’s distinctive methods of thematic construction. The other two are Chapters 7 (“Threefold Constructions”) and 8 (“Schubert’s Variations”). (3) Again, Wollenberg is interested in the influence of song in each case, but she goes beyond the obvious influences, such as the lyricism of the second themes, the large-scale ternary forms, and movements in theme and variation form. She explores how Schubert devises the harmonically unsettled character of his second themes and how, contrary to popular wisdom, his tuneful themes are “highly studied.” A particularly refreshing aspect of her examination of the ABA’ construction of Schubert’s themes is her assertion that these formal designs can be witty and playful, especially when encountered in the finales (202–6, 291). While Schubert’s threefold constructions and variation techniques are mechanisms for generating expansive forms, Wollenberg turns in Chapter 9 (“Heavenly Length”) to Schubert’s finales for his last fingerprint—his notorious reputation for repetition and expansiveness. She concurs with Schumann, however, that his musical lengths are indeed divine.

[7] The explicit harmonic and formal concerns explored in Chapters 2–4 and 7–9 are interrupted by chapters on two other fingerprints of a very different nature, namely Schubert’s Classical inspiration and apparent violent outbursts. Chapter 5 (“Schubert and Mozart”) illustrates how Schubert modeled his compositional thoughts on Mozart, an obsession he held throughout his life. Chapter 6 (“Schubert’s Violent Nature”) addresses moments of violent outbursts in Schubert’s music. A “volcanic temper” in Schubert’s music was first identified by Hugh Macdonald (1978), and later was diagnosed by Elizabeth Norman McKay (1996) as a musical manifestation of the composer’s possible bipolar condition. For Wollenberg, his condition was an important factor in shaping his individual compositional voice: “Schubert’s violent streak is the one [fingerprint] that above all seems to be at the heart of his individual way of writing” (161). This chapter is the closest Wollenberg comes to any discussion of Schubert’s biography. Yet, she makes clear she is skeptical of drawing connections between biographical and musical details, whether these are “personal circumstances” or concrete “events” in a composer’s life:

While it would be overly simple to suggest that specific works can necessarily be tied in with Schubert’s

personal circumstances, the musical phenomena to be discussed in this chapter certainly correspond to McKay's notion of Schubert's "two natures", and they display the destructiveness and extremes of mood characteristic of the bipolar self. And while direct connections with biographical *events* are an equally precarious method of interpreting works of art, it is nevertheless possible that, as McKay suggests, the aggressive energy manifested in the "Wanderer" Fantasy, D 760, may mark the start of Schubert's realization that he harboured a potentially fatal disease. (italics mine, 161–62)

[8] Yet in the chapter on Mozart, Wollenberg seems to have little trouble invoking biographical detail. Indeed, she begins with an "event" in Schubert's life, noting that he describes in his diary that on Thursday June 13, 1816, he went to a performance of one of Mozart's string quintets. As a result, he claimed that that "clear, bright, fine day will remain [with me] throughout my whole life . . . O Mozart, immortal Mozart" (133). To be sure, unlike the speculation about Schubert's bipolar condition, we have here some solid documentary evidence—a rare instance of Schubert putting pen to paper for the purposes of a diary entry. Schubert's statement is also entirely unenigmatic. It does, however, raise the question as to why a biographical event that is explicitly musical is necessarily more acceptable to bring under consideration than a composer's psychological condition. Indeed, insofar as Schubert confesses that he felt Mozart's music touched his heart and soul, Wollenberg seems content to suggest that events such as the Mozart concert had a profound bodily impact on Schubert: "His words [in the diary entry] convey the intense spiritual and perhaps even physiological effects of listening to the work presumably for the first time" (133). His bipolar disorder would have had physiological effects on the composer too.

[9] Wollenberg's skepticism about such connections perhaps explains why she also waits until the last few paragraphs of the book (Chapter 10, "Concluding Remarks: 'Whose Schubert?'" 294–95) to address briefly the scholarship by Maynard Solomon (1989) and his primary critic Rita Steblin (1993), without explicitly stating on which side of the debate on Schubert's sexuality she falls. She also mentions Scott Messing's (2006–7) reception history of Schubert's image, Charles Fisk's (2001) work on Schubert and alienation, and David Cairns (1997) on Schubert's ability to express human mortality. She then quickly reverts to the main concern of her book, namely the technical details of Schubert's fingerprints.

[10] However, it was these fingerprints that made Schubert such an attractive figure to those working to change the face of music theory and musicology in the 1980s and 90s. Undoubtedly the most well-known contribution to socio-cultural musicology—which put Schubert center stage in the seismic shift in direction taken in musicology—was Susan McClary's (1994) essay on Schubert's construction of subjectivity in the second movement of the "Unfinished." This essay features in the bibliography but nowhere in the main text,⁽⁴⁾ and, to be fair, Wollenberg does address McClary's view of the first movement from *Feminine Endings*, arguing that Schubert's second theme is not "really" quashed as McClary (1991, 69) claimed and that it contains gestures that exhibit a "markedly more powerful expressive effect" (99). It is easy to forget how analytical McClary's essay on Schubert's subjectivity was and, to be sure, no book can cover every issue or aspect of a composer, but the musical details identified by McClary for cultural and biographical questioning fall under the chapters in Wollenberg's book on major–minor mixture, poetic transitions, violence (which McClary called heroic posturing), second themes, and variation technique.

[11] Similarly, Wollenberg's view on recent theoretical developments is explained at beginning of book: "Numerous theoretical frameworks have been posited (at times with virtuosic brilliance) to explain his modulatory trajectories" (16). The footnote to this statement singles out Richard Cohn's "As Wonderful As Star Clusters" (Cohn 1999) for special mention. Wollenberg goes on to say: "while these can be illuminating in many ways, it is worth sounding Blom's caveat here: 'One must not without clear proof regard the great composers as having been theorists otherwise than by instinct'" (16).

[12] Of course, the Roman numeral system used by Wollenberg throughout her book *is* also a theoretical framework. Its familiarity may make it seem a less heavy apparatus than Cohn's hexatonic systems, but a re-examination of theoretical developments during Schubert's lifetime reveals its complexity. For example, some of Wollenberg's readings would be different had she used Gottfried Weber's view of key relations (Weber 1817–21). Her chapter on major–minor usage puts her in a line of theory where the diatonic keys within the minor mode are based on the natural minor scale; for Weber, they were based on the harmonic minor scale. Thus, whereas she writes about Schubert's uses of the diatonic minor dominant (38, 51),

for Weber this relationship would have been chromatic; *e contra*, where she says the major dominant is chromatic (38), Weber considers it diatonic. This raises the question: what was Schubert's "instinct" about such key relations? Can any theory be trusted to bring us the answer?

[13] Anyone looking for a reflection on recently minted theories of Schubert's music will not find it in this book. However, what does shine through on every page is Wollenberg's deep knowledge of Schubert's music, as she draws subtle connections across the history of his output. Her numerous reconstructions of what Schubert might have written, had he been inclined to follow common practice, illuminates what makes Schubert so distinctive. Moreover, in assiduously avoiding comparison with Beethoven throughout her study, yet in sharpening the comparison with his Classical predecessors, Wollenberg draws out the humor and wit in the music—a side of Schubert we rarely get to hear about.

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Footnotes

1. Wollenberg 1998 and 2007. Despite the same title of the latter essay and Chapter 3, the contents of the two studies are different.

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2. These types and brief examples are laid out in Wollenberg 1998, 16–27.

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3. I shall consider Chapters 5 and 6 shortly. Although I hint above that some of the chapters in the book could have been placed in a different order, the fact is that many of the fingerprints are so intertwined that many different orderings are possible. It seems that Wollenberg has gone for a design where the fingerprints are chiefly discussed in the order in which they are most likely to appear in a musical form, starting with the major–minor mixture at the beginning of works (Chapter 1) to the heavenly length of Schubert’s finales (Chapter 9).

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4. Wollenberg explains (9) that her bibliography contains items consulted, but not directly cited. A number of “new musicology” and music theoretical texts fall into this category.

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