

Mozart, *Das Veilchen* – Past and Present

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Abstract

The young Goethe’s poem “Das Veilchen” is a Zeitgeist expression of the galant mentality, but the metaphor of the flower as a victim of unrequited love was familiar also to the 18th century Wallachian poet Ienăchiță Văcărescu and appeared previously in various folkloric traditions - Arabic and Persian as well as European. The story and the characters present similarities to Werther, Faust, Blonde, and Cherubino amongst others, and the song is through-composed in keeping with the literary dramaturgy, notwithstanding principles of classical sonata form. The tonal trajectory convincingly matches the aesthetics of Chr. Fr. D. Schubart, being balanced in a frame of G major. Further musical analysis reveals the expressive role of Seufzermotive, augmented sixth chords, ornaments, rubato, and symmetry due to a closing text added by the composer as an epilogue.

The present-day performances discussed take the reader into the catalysing effect the Romanian Mozart Society has had on local musical life, as well as in the European landscape more widely, from historically informed performance to “punkademics”. Emphasis is placed on one performance by Nina Hagen in particular, which adds to the original and blends in cabaret, Sprechgesang, belcanto and mantra elements – melting apotheosis and caricature. To conclude, a trajectory will be unfolded of “Das Veilchen” from its origins in Volksgeist to a recent appearance in world music.

Keywords: origin and reception of the work, tonal aesthetics according to Schubart, hidden sonata form, Mozart reception in Romania, classical and punk performances, from *Volksgeist* to world music, teaching of music history.

Introduction

As far back as I have taught music history, I have been aware of the appropriateness of the aesthetic tonal “inventories” produced for art music works: for Bach and Handel we have Mattheson, while for Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven we have Schubart. As the concordances for vocal music are convincingly clear, it results that connecting these characteristics to instrumental music also could be fruitful for performers and listeners. The study below includes an example of this proposition, extended by other historic and analytical views, as well as by some performance appreciation.

Apart from the addition of the formal analysis, the paper presented here is essentially a translation of an essay published previously in Romanian (Șorban 2021, 111-122).

The Poem – Origins in *Zeitgeist* and *Volksgeist*

The young Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) published “Das Veilchen” in his first Singspiel *Erwin und Elmire*, in a literature magazine *Iris. Vierteljahresschrift für Frauenzimmer* in March 1775. The text of Goethe's play is an adaptation of the ballad “The Hermit” by the Irish writer Oliver Goldsmith, from the sentimental novel *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766).

The play presents the separation and reconciliation of a pair of lovers - a typical topic of the galant style¹ - and in this song Goethe, who was in love at the time himself, assumes the role of the little flower (Kuhn 1999, 124). In the play, this poem is intoned by the central female character, the young Elmire, who admits regretfully to her mentor, old Bernardo, that she has rejected Erwin by her cold attitude - thus assuming the role of the Shepherdess.

As was fashionable at the time, the content of the poem fits the folkloric theme of the flower as a metaphor for a victim of love.

¹ Other famous examples include the earlier musical plays *Le Devin du village* (1752) by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Mozart's *Bastien and Bastienne* (1768).

Goethe had indeed already written a similar poem “Heidenröslein”² in 1771 (published much later, in 1789).

The main idea is that a love rejection brings no blame... The interpretation of the denouement in both poems by Goethe could be related to Leibniz’ philosophy that “God has chosen the best of all possible worlds” (1710, paragraph 168)³.

Looking at Goethe's wider output, with a bit of imagination one could consider “The Violet” to have a message which also parallels the epistolary novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), which had brought fame to the writer a year earlier. And would “The Violet” not also potentially be a prototype for *Faust*? Either with Margaret in mind, considering the perspective of the apotheotic ending of the second part of the tragedy (published posthumously, in 1832) or even Doctor Faust himself, who, in his old age, discovers the brevity of life.

In the study of Romanian literature, Goethe's lyric is frequently compared with that of his Wallachian contemporary, the boyar Ienăchiță Văcărescu (1740-1797). Both erudite writers were fluent not only in several European languages but also in Arabic and Persian. The similarities in content and poetic language are probably due not only to the modern galant spirit of the time, but also to their knowledge of the folkloric traditions that inspired them, or perhaps also of Greek and neo-Greek poetry (Pușcariu 1920, online).

Let’s return to the poem “Das Veilchen”. Its enduring popularity is reflected in the fact that the text has been used in many musical compositions – some even before Mozart’s song. Versions that follow Mozart’s include one by Clara Schumann (1853) and another by the Russian post-Romantic Nikolai Medtner (1909). The music to Goethe’s original full play was composed by various composers of the time, including the Duchess Anna Amalia of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel, the writer’s patron at Weimar; over the years, other authors followed.

² Its best-known musical version is Franz Schubert's strophic lied (1815).

³ *Essais de Théodicée*...: First, French edition 1710; the posthumous German edition 1744 – is kept in Goethe's father's library (Menze 1980, 46). Leibniz's influence on Goethe is widely known, regarding Faust.

A contemporary and admirer of Mozart, Goethe began to write the libretto *Der Zauberflöte zweiter Teil* [The Second Part of the Magic Flute] in 1795, which he worked on intermittently and did not publish until 1802. Towards the end of his life, Goethe declared that “Mozart [is the one who] should have composed [on the text of] *Faust*” (Eckermann 1836, Chapter 111, 1829 February 12; online).

The Song’s Place in Mozart’s Oeuvre

“Das Veilchen” K. 476, is the only time Mozart set Goethe’s work to music, and the naive-sentimental narrative of the text and its setting are revealing of tastes at the time (Glauert 2004, 75).

Mozart is supposed to have found the poem in a collection of songs where the author was not even mentioned, but he noted Goethe’s name on his manuscript. The lied was preserved in an autograph (Arthur and Schachter 1989, 153) in his usual hurried handwriting, dated 8 June 1785, which can now be found in the British Library, London.⁴

The circumstances in which the lied was composed are not known, but the similarity of the first line’s melody to Blonde’s aria in the Singspiel *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* (K. 384, 1782) is to be noted (Corneilson 2003, 130).⁵ The lied was first printed at the Artaria publishing house in Vienna, but it was not until 1789 that it became widely available.⁶

Psychologically and dramaturgically, this miniature prefigures emblematic Mozartian characters: The Violet is in a similar situation to the adolescent Cherubino in the opera *The Marriage of Figaro* during the C minor moment in the final aria of Act I “E se non ho chi

4 bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Zweig_MS_56

⁵ The situation of the characters is somewhat similar, Blonde being threatened by Osmin, but the denouement is the opposite; in this aria (*Durch Zärtlichkeit und Schmeicheln* – “Through tenderness and flattery”, second act, A major – “innocent love”, as Schubart means), she tries to instruct the Turk on the benefits of gallant behaviour in order to conquer a woman.

⁶ Detailed source description: *Neue Mozart Ausgabe*, 2006, at: dme.mozarteum.at/DME/nma/nma_cont.php?vsep=90&l=1&p1=105; previous commentaries, a.o., in Arthur and Schachter 1989, 149-150.

m'oda,/Parlo d'amor con me!" [And if there is no one to hear me, / I speak of love to myself], and also the Shepherdess could be thought of as an alter ego to Don Giovanni himself. The plight of The Violet, depicted in the “anguished” G minor, anticipates Pamina’s aria in *Zauberflöte* as well as the introduction to the Finale of the Quintet K. 516 (Arthur and Schachter 1989, 153).

Connecting the Song’s Tonalities to the Poem’s Affects – In the Mirror of Chr. Fr. D. Schubart’s Aesthetics

An examination of the tonal progression of the piece – from the perspective of Christian Friedrich Daniel Schubart’s (1739-1791) approach to musical aesthetics – and comparing it to the sequence of affects in the poem reveals remarkable coincidences. We should remember that Schubart formulated his considerations in 1784-85, that he was familiar with Mozart's music⁷, and that his writings were quite well known by his German contemporaries (*Ideen zu einer Ästhetik der Tonkunst* was only published posthumously, in 1806, but during his lifetime he attained a degree of fame connected to his imprisonment for his libertarian behaviour and political views.⁸)

Table 1. Correlations between Literary and Musical Semantics

Lyrics and tempo marks	Tonalities and their characterization by Schubart
<p><i>(Allegretto)</i> [1.] [Piano introduction-phrase.] <i>Ein Veilchen auf der Wiese stand,</i> <i>Gebückt in sich und unbekannt;</i> <i>Es war ein herzigs Veilchen.</i></p>	<p>G major – “everything rustic, idyllic, and lyrical, each quiet and satisfied passion, each tender recompense for sincere friendship and true love; in a word, each gentle and serene motion of the heart can be expressed splendidly in this key”.</p>

⁷ See <https://www.mozartdocuments.org/documents/1780-schubart/>; a short biography of Schubart is given by DuBois 2004, 166.

⁸ I have largely taken over the English version of DuBois (1983 and 2004). As can be seen, I have kept the German text of the poem; English translations of the lyrics a.o. at: oxfordlieder.co.uk/song/648 and lieder.net/.

Lyrics and tempo marks	Tonalities and their characterization by Schubart
<p><i>Da kam ein' junge Schäferin Mit leichtem Schritt und muntrem Sinn Daher, daher, Die Wiese her und sang.</i> [Piano interlude-phrase.]</p>	D major – “the key of triumph, of Hallelujahs, of battle cries, of triumphant rejoicing. Accordingly, one sets attractive symphonies, marches, festive songs, and heaven-rejoicing choruses in this key”.
<p>[2.] <i>Ach! denkt das Veilchen, wär' ich nur</i></p>	G minor – “displeasure, uneasiness, worry about a failed scheme; discontented gnashing at the bit; in a word, anger and disgust”.
<p><i>Die schönste Blume der Natur, Ach, nur ein kleines Weilchen, Bis mich das Liebchen abgepflückt Und an dem Busen matt gedrückt, Ach, nur, ach nur Ein Viertelstündchen lang!</i></p>	B-flat major – “cheerful love, good conscience, hope, a longing for a better world”.
<p>[3.] <i>Ach, aber ach! Das Mädchen kam Und nicht in Acht</i></p>	E-flat major – “the key of love, of pious devotion, of intimate conversation with God”.
<p><i>das Veilchen nahm, Ertrat das arme Veilchen. Es sank und starb, und freut' sich noch:</i></p>	C minor – “declaration of love, and at the same time lamentation of unrequited love. Every languishing, longing, sighing of the love-crazed soul lies in this key”.
<p><i>Und sterb' ich denn, so sterb' ich doch Durch sie, durch sie, Zu ihren Füßen doch!</i></p>	G major (see at the beginning)
<p><i>(a piacere)</i>⁹</p>	G major

⁹ Mozart's original indication, allowing rhythmic freedom to the performer for rhetorical purposes in the short *arioso* section. The *rubato* within the limits of classical good taste, is typical of Mozart's style, as the composer

Lyrics and tempo marks	Tonalities and their characterization by Schubart
<i>Das arme Veilchen!</i> (a tempo) <i>Es war ein herzigs Veilchen.</i>	(The last two verses, as an epilogue, were added by Mozart.)

The home key of G major is “rustic, idyllic [and] lyrical” according to Schubart, expressing “each gentle and serene motion of the heart”. In a Classical sense, it is a balancing tonality, and the modulations in the score characterise the characters and their moods.

Following Schubart’s thinking, while the D major associated with the Shepherdess would be thought of as triumphant, The Violet’s G minor would be displeasure – appropriate considering that the character is a metaphor for an unstable teenager – and B-flat major is “longing for a better world”. Later, we get “pious devotion” from E-flat major and “unrequited love” from C minor before returning to the idyllic G major.

A Hidden Sonata Form, and Further Analysis

The *durchkomponiert* (through-composed) lied is less frequently found in Viennese Classical music, where the strophic form was preferred.¹⁰ Mozart’s dramatic sense is effective since every single moment of the narrative in verse is reflected in a specific way, according to the situation. Nevertheless, form and tonalities show similarities to the principles of the Classical sonata. There is a tonic-dominant tonal contrast between the two ideas in the first stanza (26 bars) and the second has a developmental aspect (bars 27-42, 16 in total). In the recapitulation-like third (bars 43-60, 18 in total) the return to G major preceded by the subdominant is also notable, however without textual nor melodic reprise the effect is that the landscape

himself attests (see Bera 2007, 63-64). Prominent performers, including those recommended below, bring the piece to life precisely by applying rubato to dramatic moments.

¹⁰ Interestingly, Mozart’s through-composed songs – K307, K308, K476, K519, K520, K523 – have a melancholic poetic content, as if the soul troubles would be reflected by the irregular form.

looks the same but the people have been removed. The coda (bars 61-65) reminds us of The Violet and its fate.

The golden ratio proportions of the music are almost congruent with the stanzas of the text, and the through-composed principle is manifested by irregular text cutting and musical morphology of the second and third strophes, resulting in a form which could be considered as a hidden ternary sonata. And although the ones Mozart built in the G minor aria “Tiger! Wetze nur die Klauen” in *Zaide*, K. 344, 1780, (analysed in Rosen 1980, 66-67) or in the regular form of the Trio in the 3rd movement of the String Quintet in C major K. 515, 1787, (revealed by László 2008, 17-18) are more evident, this shy example is perhaps all the more exciting.

The melodic profiles have illustrative or even rhetorical meanings to add to those we have discovered by tonal analysis. In spite of being in G major, the initial musical idea – first declared by the piano, then taken up again by the voice, and returning at the end – is actually rather hesitant, its predominantly descending line interspersed with rests and, as such, suggesting the modesty of The Violet. The Shepherdess is represented by a melodic idea of contrasting derivation in D major (described as a “parallelism” by Arthur and Schachter 1989, 152); the rests here (bars 17-18) illustrate her skipping steps, before the portrait concludes with a playful, exclamatory piano interlude-phrase representing her song (bars 23-26). The Violet's reactions oscillate between confidence and nostalgia not only tonally, but also through the melody, which is at times brisk and flowing. It is enhanced by piano ornamentation with grupettos (bars 36, 38), and at other times by dissonant intervals which are felt as interjections. The music breaks (bar 51), and The Violet's initial melodic profile is modified, her death being suggested by chromatic harmonies, flowing in atypical sequences, associated with *Seufzermotive* (bars 51-55). The word *starb* [died] is emphasised by an unresolved, chromatically continued ascending augmented sixth chord (bar 53, the same augmented sixth chord which had appeared associated to the word *Viertelstündchen* in bar 41, less rhetorically underlined, maybe as a foreshadowing suggestion). The fatal denouement is exuberantly played in G major, with ascending exclamations (bars 57-58), expressing the joy of union with the beloved beyond the death. A

resolution in keeping with classical, Aristotelian aesthetics – according to which art is not only mimesis but also catharsis (Wißkirchen 2011, 14).

The composer finishes with a short refrain of text and melody: “she was a dear little Violet” – as though concluding a story beginning with the quiet evocation “once upon a time”...

Present-Day Performances, from HIP to Punk

“Das Veilchen” is today one of Mozart’s most performed lieder worldwide. Of the innumerable versions posted online, I would highlight the soprano Anne Cambier’s version (Quintessence BVBA 2016; duration: 2’08”). Her luminous, lyrical, quasi-adolescent voice, accompanied by Jan Vermeulen on the fortepiano, is captivating, as is the players’ finely nuanced agogic, and their interpretation is ideally in keeping with Schubart’s description of “everlasting human songs which magnificently imitate the singing of angels” (DuBois 2004, 169). So I consider this version as an excellent reference point for high expressivity in historically informed performance.

It should be noted that in Romania this lied is part of the mandatory repertoire of the singing section of the Mozart Performance Contest, organised by the Romanian Mozart Society in partnership with the National Academy of Music Gheorghe Dima, a section established in 1995 by the founder and president of the society, musicologist Ferenc László. The laureate of the first edition was the tenor Marius Vlad Budoiu (b. 1970), a singer who has since confirmed his value on the great concert and opera stages of the world. I was unable to find a recording made in the contest, but on YouTube one can find his live 2016 version (2’12”) – coloured and quite theatrical, as well as fiery, with a heroic allure, and accompanied with discretion by Cadmiel Boţac (as the pianist takes the role of The Violet).

The entry of the piece into pop culture is further proof that it has a strong appeal. Punk singer Nina Hagen (b. 1955) promotes her own versions of “Das Veilchen”, a first concert version was later included on the album *Live in Krefeld* (2001), but a performance of particular note is a live concert from 2003 at Schwäbisch Hall (4’45”). Goethe’s text can be seen, in this interpretation, as a satire on pointless sacrifice

(the appearance of the Shepherdess seems militarised to me) – a view to which Nina Hagen adds further nuances in each performance (thankfully many of these can be found on YouTube). The text is preserved, but the melodic flow is simplified by her delivery in a cabaret-like *Sprechgesang* manner. Closing with the Hare Krishna mantra adds to the overall message; the sacred utterance is polysemous, and of the possible interpretations from Sanskrit, I would choose God’s capacity to remove illusions as the most appropriate here.¹¹ The improvisatory hallelujah epilogue transmits an ambiguous message, containing both apotheosis and caricature; it is tragic and ironic, expressed by ridiculed *bel canto* passages. It is a relevant example of the contemporary fusion between punk and academic music, by the so-called punkademics (a term coined by Furness, 2012). Is Mozart’s “Violet” thus trampled underfoot? – Or picked up and taken to the heart?...

Conclusions

Both as a poem and a song, “Das Veilchen” is a miniature masterpiece, which expresses the message of some other large works by the two creators.

Schubart’s tonal characteristics match the Goethean poetic content to the musical affects of Mozart, while the unusual and complex through-composed form of the lied merges with latent sonata form principles (both in terms of being bithematic and tristrophic).

A relevant expression of *Volksgeist* and *Zeitgeist*, Goethe and Mozart’s “Das Veilchen” was converted in the early 2000s into an icon of world music.

¹¹ According to [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hare_Krishna_\(mantra\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hare_Krishna_(mantra)); see also en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hare_Krishna_in_popular_culture.

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