

Schubert: The Strange and the Supernatural

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Abstract

This study aims to comprehend better the culture surrounding Romantic aesthetics of fantasy and the uncanny during the nineteenth century (c.1800-1890) and evaluate how their expression in Schubert's music can be understood. Initially, it will examine philosophical writings (Chander 2015; Ffytche) artwork (Crane 2013; Dunekacke 2016) and literature (Geistfeld 2015; Smajic 2003) of the period, combining this examination with academic literature (Ellerman 2015; Trumball 1905) to explore why and how ideas around fantasy and the uncanny were spreading through European culture and taking on extra significance. After explaining why Schubert is the choice of subject for this study, it will apply these findings to hermeneutic musical perspectives of Schubert's music, providing insight into the relationship between aesthetic theory, cultural practice, and analytic theory. Firstly, the literary perspective, connected to the supernatural, poetic, and Romantic notions of imagination (Adorno 1928; Brittan 2017; Gooley 2018, Hengyue 2020; Young 2011) followed by, the psychoanalytic perspective, connected to psychological theories and ideas surround the 'Other', Hidden Strange and Unfamiliar (Lalonde 2017; Klein 2009; Kramer 1998; Smith 2010; Spitzer 2011). Repertoire explored with these perspectives will include Schubert's Octet, *Der Wanderer*, *Erlkönig*, *Gretchen am Spinnrade*, *Ganymed*, Symphony in C major and more. The findings will draw conclusions about how fantasy and the uncanny in Schubert's music can be best understood and analysed. Finally, these findings may benefit other areas of scholarship and be developed in future research.

Keywords: Music, Schubert, Fantasy

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Introduction

“The Fantasy is an elusive genre...many writers after 1900 simply abandoned the possibility that the genre could be defined at all.” (Coppola 1998 p.169)

Fantasy and related concepts have long been under investigated in musicology. Where they have been included, they've been treated with high caution, often subject to certain musical conditions and forms, usually the fantasia form or evaluated within contemporary film literature. (Butler 1974; Coppola 1998)

This has limited our cultural, aesthetic, and philosophical understanding of these concepts within music which can be understood as their phenomenological, subjective, emotional, psychological, sensory, and artistic value.

This study aims to investigate and evaluate the way in which Romantic aesthetics of fantasy and the uncanny (c.1800 onwards) can be understood, and how their expression in nineteenth century composer Franz Schubert's music can be analysed. Schubert was an extremely innovative composer of the period who: “chose his own path...as a songwriter- he was clearly right in his choice of German texts...who gave him the right sort of emotional stimulus.” (Gammond, 2018, p.31)

Many regarded Schubert's works as feminine in tone and his work was held against societal standards and artistic notions of gender and artistic notions, meaning he was largely overshadowed by those composers who embodied the heroic, masculine image that became so popular during the century. (Gammond 2018, p.164)

This however makes Schubert a wonderfully appropriate choice of subject for this study, for concepts of fantasy and the uncanny were often explored using what many perceived to be feminine musical qualities and throughout forms incorporating poetry and music.

Initially, this study will consider fantasy and uncanny in other art forms during the nineteenth century to enrich our social, philosophical, and cultural understanding of it before exploring it musically. Previously disparate areas of scholarship in relation to the fantastic, uncanny, and supernatural in music, produce two perspectives on evaluation which I have described as literary and psychoanalytic. We shall explore these in further detail through Schubert's compositions.

Culture, Society and the Arts; Fantasy and the Uncanny in the nineteenth century

The Romantic aesthetics of the nineteenth century were preceded by the eighteenth century's Age of Enlightenment, which had celebrated logic, intellectual ability, scientific understanding and a clarity, balance and simplicity of the arts. (Trumball 1905). According to Benjamin McRae, Romanticism began to question “the boundaries between life and death, matter and spirit, dreams and reality” and contest “the aggressive incursions of rationalism” that the Enlightenment had upheld. (McRae Arness 1996, p.264)

The concept of “aesthetic culture” was therefore truly recognised and appreciated during the long nineteenth century for the first time, by philosophers including Schelling, Kant,

Bourdieu and Adorno.¹ (Chander 2015; Ferris 2014) There was also a deeper interest in the *Unheimlich*, (the Uncanny) and fantasy. Schelling defined it as a “darkening power” (Lalonde 2017, p.103) and Freud as “something which is familiar and old-established in the mind, and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression”. (Lalonde 2017 pp.98- 100) The Uncanny symbolised an active engagement with such forces and otherworldly concepts.

It is important that we consider fantasy and uncanny in other art forms, before exploring it musically. Late eighteenth- century and nineteenth-century visual artists began to explore the ability of art to shock, confuse, induce awe and unease in the spectator, as Romantic ideals took hold. (Armstutz 2016) Madeline Crane’s states that such art works possessed a “strangeness...sublimity...a sense of the irrational” providing insights into “an invisible” hidden universe, including works by Joseph Turner and Henry Fuseli. (Crane 2013).



Figure 1- Henry Fuseli's Midnight (Crane 2013)

The work of British nineteenth century artist Walter Crane is another example of this. His depictions of extraordinary and imaginative within ordinary settings of modern life, embodied the Uncanny. (Dunekacke, 2016 p.2)

¹ Both Kant and Bourdieu explore the idea of self-knowledge and autonomy in relation to cultural practise in the nineteenth century, discussing individual contribution to the forging and challenging of cultural taste, as well as the deeper, mutual influence that each of the art forms had one on another. The significance of such theories is that Romantic audiences and artists were, for the first time, recognising the value and potential of such cultural autonomy and “position-taking” which resulted in a kind of cultural tension of artistic opinion. (Chander 2015; Ferris 2014)

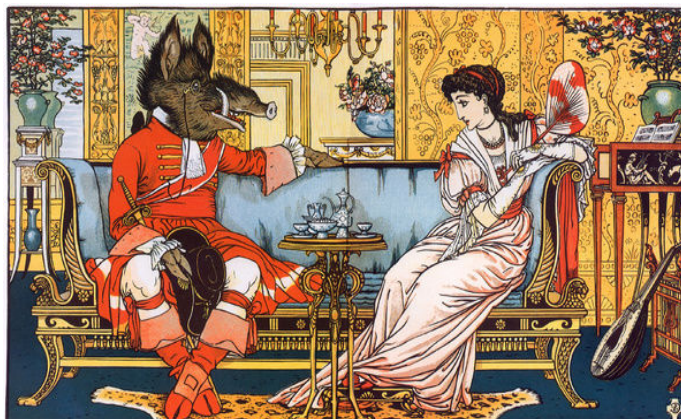


Figure 2- Walter Crane's The Beauty and The Beast (The Guardian 2015)

Literature too provided a platform to explore this, particularly through ghost stories and novels exploring dark, supernatural forces.² E.T.A. Hoffmann blended Enlightenment principles of logic and reason with more imaginative concepts, including his 1816 story *Der Sandmann* (Geistfeld 2015)³ while poets such as Henrick Heine's and Goethe explored themes of desire, love, bliss and torment, morality, the supernatural and darker forces in *Faust*, (1808) (The Poetry Foundation 2020)⁴

Contemporary author Smajic suggests that such works are "better adapted to the climate of...psychoanalytic, rather than historic readings"(Smajic 2003 p.1107) believing they transcend any political or social relevance. It would not be wise, to disregard the cultural, literary and social perspective altogether for as we have discovered, political and philosophical thinking of certain times had a great impact on culture and art. (Smajic 2003, p. 1108)

Musical perspectives; Fantasy and the Uncanny in the nineteenth century

Previously disparate areas of scholarship in relation to the fantastic, uncanny and supernatural in music, produce two perspective on evaluation, analysis and review which I have described as literary and psychoanalytic. Here we shall explore these in further detail.

The Literary Perspective

During the nineteenth century, many ideas which were explored in literature began to be explored through music. Previous research including by Cone, Coppolla, Dalhaus, Lindegren and Rosen has often been focused on the construction of stanza's, song cycles and narrative storytelling functions of music. What remains less clear are the devices composers employ to portray literary aesthetics of fantasy and the uncanny.

For example, as well as word painting there is great harmonic and textural instability within 'Der Wanderer'. In an example Hengyue uses, we hear a rising sequence, gradually growing

² Examples include Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Grey* (1890) Walter Scott's *The Tapestry Chamber* (1829) and Agust Apel's *The Marksman* (1811) (Smajic 2003)

³ *Der Sandmann* is based on losing one's grip on reality due to external and internal forces and deals with themes such as the dangers of technology as well as one's own mind. (Geistfeld 2015).

⁴ *Faust* tells of a man, selling his soul to the devil in exchange for power, knowledge and enjoyment. (The Poetry Foundation 2021)

more unstable as a minor key is introduced towards the end. A new phrase then begins with a sustained chordal piano accompaniment, in great contrast to the staccato triplets previously.

The image displays a musical score for 'Der Wanderer'. It consists of four systems of staves. The first system includes 'Voice Lead' and 'Grand Piano'. The second system includes 'Vc. Ld.' and 'Pno.'. The third system includes 'Vc. Ld.' and 'Pno.'. Annotations include orange circles and rectangles highlighting specific intervals and textures. The score is in a key with three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and a 3/8 time signature. Dynamics like *p* and *f* are indicated.

Figure 3 - Leaping intervals in Der Wanderer followed by analysis of minor key, chordal accompaniment and textural, harmonic instability.

Adorno points out harmonic instability and shifts between areas of tonal grounding and modulation in Schubert’s C major Symphony, which may symbolize a contrast between light and dark which are the basis for Schubert’s musical landscape. (Adorno 1928)

The image shows a musical score for Schubert's C major Symphony, featuring multiple instruments: Flute, Oboe, Clarinet, Bassoon, and Horn in C. The score is in 3/4 time and C major. Dynamics like *fp* and *f* are used. Annotations include orange rectangles highlighting passages of harmonic uncertainty. Fingerings like 6 and 5 are indicated for the Bassoon.

Figure 4- Schubert’s C major Symphony, passages of harmonic uncertainty between the tonic

Adorno describes Schubert's body of work as a construction of an imaginative landscape, centred around death, darkness and the unknown, cultivated largely through his song cycles, with their aimless cycle of 5ths, harmonic rotation, and repeated themes. For example The A minor Quartet being dubbed "The Rosamunde Quartet" bears a resemblance to melodic counter and rhythm of the orchestral work.

Another element to consider is Nicholas' Young's study on what he terms "fantastic fragments" in nineteenth century German Lieder of literary/poetic origin. He identifies what he calls "brevity", a temporary fleeting experience of the fantastic phenomena, or a musical hesitancy which heightens its intensity (Young 2011) citing the introduction of 'Der Tod und Das Mädchen', with a lack of harmonic function, a slow, steady build and plenty of hesitancy to evoke death's looming and uncanny presence.

Another technique he discusses is the use of double voicing and repetition in 'Der Doppleganger', where the opening contains compressed intense doubling of the outer voices, (Young 2011, p.6) perhaps this is to heighten the undeniable presence of the Uncanny and the Doppelganger throughout the narrative.

Figure 5- Opening with harmonic stasis in 'Der Tod und Das Machen'

Figure 6- Outer voice doubling in Der Doppleganger.

Interestingly, musicologist Amanda Lalonde also discusses slow hesitant introductions as "the initiating stage of a passage from chaos to order". She views these as two separate entities when we may argue it is the interplay and interconnection between the two that creates the juxtaposition, unfamiliarity and uncertainty effects such as in the introduction the Allegro of Schubert's *Octet in F* (1824) where hesitant breaks are situated between chaotic chromatic short passages.

Moreover the idea of a "process of becoming" through music, which has been discussed by musicologists can be connected to ideas of tension, brevity, hesitancy here. (Lalonde 2017; Truscott 1961; Schmalfeldt, 2011). Especially since fantasy and the uncanny were often

connected to ideas of hiddenness and obscurity. For example prolonged ties are evocative of such literary ideas of the strange and supernatural in Schubert's *Octet in F* (1824) in bar 223-226.

Figure 7- Prolonged notes, ties, and tension within Schubert's *Octet in F* .

Moreover, Kramer explores repetition in Schubert's Piano Trio in E flat, highlighting resemblances of second movement's themes within the third, which marks a diversion from the norms surrounding thematic development and convention at the time. (Kramer 1998) This disruption, along with the subtle, intrinsic repetition of motif is indeed uncanny in tone and evokes a strange kind of unfamiliarity and confusion. What is uncanny about this is that there is a double-bind – the unexpected and return of the repressed is emancipated in the sudden appearance within the third movement in the submediant key. This opens up ideas into musical manifestation of the unorthodox and uncanny being not just related to dissonance, but also structural aspects such as this. These transcendent moments could themselves be thought of uncanny.

Figure 8- Second Movement themes in the E flat trio, submediant key utilised.

Figure 9- A repetition and imitation of the second movement's theme in the third.

Furthermore, Hengyue remarks on how “segmented phrase structure and ambiguous key area...portray confusion” and imaginary landscapes in Schubert’s musical setting of *Der Wanderer* (Hengyue, 2020 p21). For instance, in bars 36- 40, the melody line flits between minor and major keys it rises and falls in big leaps and offers up strange and unsettling silences.

The sudden chordal interjections are reminiscent of frightened or shocked jolts which seem to evoke fear, uncertainty and a sense of disturbance also.

Figure 10- ‘Der Wanderer’ analysis with sudden silence, modulation to minor, sharp chords.

Francesca Brittan’s and Marshall Brown both write on the ability of nineteenth century orchestral idiom and instrumentation to create new, strange and Otherworldly sounds. (Brittan 2018; Bro2n 2009) In Schubert’s Scherzo of his 6th symphony there is indeed a deliberate light, textural and timbral use of winds which was associated with the mythical, supernatural and unknown.⁵

⁵ Brown also discusses the use of instrumentation, stating that “the brilliant use of the winds in constantly varying combinations and textures...occasionally piquant sonorities...the play of lights...is never optional” (Brown 2009, p. 96) implying that the choice and manipulation of certain instrument timbres can create a sense of the mythological and fantastical landscape, as Adorno believes Schubert sought to construct.

The image shows a musical score for the first four staves of Schubert's 'Scherzo' from his C major symphony. The staves are labeled Flute, Oboe, Clarinet, and Bassoon. The music is in 3/4 time. The Flute and Oboe parts have dynamic markings *sfz* and *fp*. The Clarinet part has a *sfz* marking. The Bassoon part has *sfz* and *fp* markings. The score shows the first few measures of the piece, with various notes and rests.

Figure 11- Schubert's winds in his 'Scherzo' from his C major symphony.

The psychoanalytic perspective

The Romantic period was the first to acknowledge the power of music to portray the “inmost expression of the mind” and achieve “psychological penetration” of composer and listener. (Drennan, Pakendorf, Viljoe 2019, p.159-163)

The field of psychoanalysis emerged during the nineteenth century. Theories around the fantastic, uncanny and strange were created by Sigmund Freud, who believed fantasy was not part of “material reality” but of a “psychical reality” and that the uncanny is that “which ... has become alien...through the process of repression”(Lalonde p.98) Schelling earlier had labelled the Uncanny as “everything which should remain in secrecy...and has emerged into perception”.(Lalonde p.101) While one category of Jung’s twelve personality archetypes “the shadow” was posited to facilitate fantasy, desire, repressed memories and the unknown. These were all seen as integral to the psyche. (BBC Radio 4 2004; Lobiano and Bartalis; Rand and Torok p.593, Warwick University 2015)

Musicologist Christopher Tarrant uses twentieth century psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan’s graph of mental fantasy regulation to analyse Schubert Sonatas. He suggests modal mixture and bass arpeggiation act like this mental cycle by “dispel(ling) problems posed by musical structures which rely predominantly on modulation through a third” (Tarrant 2015, p.201) Tarrant’s ideas are interesting but too focused on “finding an answer” and precise fleeting moments of fantasy within a work. This is therefore a rather strict and restrictive method of analysis which does not encompass broader cultural, the literary and philosophical ideas.

Music analyst Kenneth Smith also suggests that a constant circling through the cycle of fifths may represent unattainable desire in contrast with the harsh Lacanian Real. (Smith 2010) He states that use of Lendvai’s chordal substitution system, whereby “primary triads can be substituted by the tritone related or relative minor secondary triads” reinforce these musical effects. (Smith 2010 p.81) For instance, in Schubert’s ‘Gretchen am Spinnrade’ the music cycles through fifths sequentially at the moment where the narrator/singer delves into a fantasy mindset, the cycle ends and the harmony is grounded when he returns to reality. (Smith 2010 p.83-84).

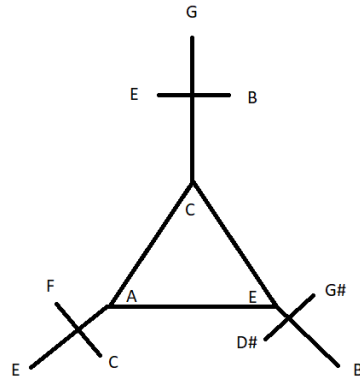


Figure 12- Lendvai’s Chordal Axial Substitution system.

Figure 13- Spinning through cycle of fifths as narrator descends into a fantasy mindset.

Another key idea in relation to these concepts musically is that of incompleteness or an unfinished, unbalanced or unclear musical phrase. Young suggests that unanswered fragments within nineteenth century vocal music allow for the audience to use their fantasies and imagination to create an ending within their minds. (Young 2011)

For example, in ‘Frühlingstraum’, a folk like melody in A major is followed by a cycle of rapidly shifting keys, settling on the relative A minor, (Young 2011 p.14) which embodies the very concept of unfulfilled desire. This also causes a juxtaposition between relative minor and major may indeed signify the difference between “the illusory world of beautiful bright dream (and) the real world of banal, wretched, naked reality (Heinrich in Kindermann 1986). Interdisciplinary musicologist Naomi Waltham-Smith’s theory of “the time it takes to listen” as the gap in which a listener hears the preconceived ending of a musical phrase or cadence and her discussion of the power of disrupting that, is also relevant to the evocation of the fantastic, strange and uncanny in music. (Waltham-Smith 2008)



Figure 14- Ending of ‘Frühlingstraum’ on relative minor chord.

Musicologist Spitzer suggests that the construction of musical personae can manipulate a “listener’s own hermeneutic activity” to finesse their “undeciphered fears”. (Spitzer 2011, p.201-202). He uses the example of Schubert’s ‘Erlkönig’, with the interplay between the tenderness of the ‘Erlkönig’ persona and the aggressive persona of the father in the story. (Spitzer 2011, p.199) to discuss this. For as musicologist Christopher Gibbs also highlights the use of timbre, register, metrics, and key to present the Erlkonig’s voice as “frightening in its sweetness, deadly in its beauty” acts as a confusing collaboration of the safety and danger. (Gibbs 1995, p.130). This literally embodies the idea of the uncanny, or a disturbing interplay between reality and the unknown.



Figure 15- High register used for the Erlkönig's melody line.

Scholar Michael Klein’s also discusses musical persona in relation to the four narrative archetypes he suggests are evident in nineteenth century music- romance, irony, comedy, and tragedy. He states that the personas within such as feminine, heroic or villainous can confirm

or deny cultural codes, and Kramer, Gibbs' and Spitzer's research suggests that such a denial or confirmation may contribute to the fantastic, strange and supernatural within music of the time. There is a social and political connection here to for as Kramer suggests, the negation of musical form and musical irony can be heard as a rejection of the norms of heterosexuality and masculinity within nineteenth century society. For example in the closure of *Urlinie* of 'Die Stadt' the male vocal line defies natural harmonic descent, (Kramer 1998 p.31) which we may view not only as a rejection of natural harmonic progression, but of gender register norms, of melodic contour and timbre and a fantasy or desire for the male narrator to explore his feminine and sensitive side.



Figure 16- Male vocal line ascending rather than descending towards closure.

Kramer delves further into the expression of desire and fantasy as he explores Schubert's *Ganymed* as a symbol of the "wish to be woman." He highlights the melisma, the repetition and differing key areas as symbols of impulsive desire. (Kramer 1998, p.22). The contrast of light sonorities and dark in the work as well as modulations to unrelated keys which are often in the submediant and flattened submediant makes us wonder if such sounds are representative of the jousissance sense of fantasy and an idealism of fantasy and desire as a higher transcendental dialectical position. Indeed this is a key and harmonic technique we came across in Schubert's E flat trio and also ties in with social, cultural and political ideas of the time rooted in rejecting quotidian life to escape into the world of myth, love, and innerlichkeit (inwardness).

The image displays two systems of musical notation. The first system is for 'Voice Lead' and 'Piano'. The second system is for 'Vc. Ld.' and 'Pno.'. Both systems are in 4/4 time and the key of B-flat major (three flats). The piano accompaniment in both systems features a prominent triplet of eighth notes in the right hand and chords in the left hand. In the first system, a specific chord in the piano part is circled in orange, representing a flattened submediant. The vocal line in the first system has a melodic line with a slur and a fermata over the final note.

Figure 17- Harmonic Modulations in Ganymed, with disconnected accompaniment line.
Flattened submediant circled.

Finally, in analysing “The Trout” quintet, Kramer sees the narrator’s replication and imitation of the melodic motifs signifying the trout as his desire to become the trout, a female symbol within the narrative. He notes the link between sixteenth figures between different instruments as a sign of identification with the Trout’s narrative. (Kramer 1998.) Perhaps it is also the interplay of lightness and brightness of touch (feminine), with the darker, melancholic sonorities (masculine) and distinctive use of instrumentation to achieve this which are suggestive of this desire.

The image displays a musical score for Schubert's Trout Quintet, measures 1 through 5. The score is arranged in two systems. The first system includes staves for Violin, Viola, Cello, Contrabass, and Grand Piano. The second system includes staves for Violin (Vln.), Viola (Vla.), Violoncello (Vc.), Contrabasso (Cb.), and Piano (Pno.). The music is in 4/4 time and features a variety of rhythmic patterns, including sixteenth notes, triplets, and octave doublings. Dynamics such as *pp* and *p* are indicated throughout the score.

Figure 18- Trout Quintet Schubert with sixteenth notes in both piano and instrumental parts as well as octave doubling and distinct usage of instrumentation.

Conclusions

The following chart shows the results of this study's evaluation. Signifiers of fantasy and the uncanny in Schubert's music have been identified within both the literary and psychoanalytic perspectives and analysis of these findings has allowed us to establish areas of overlap.

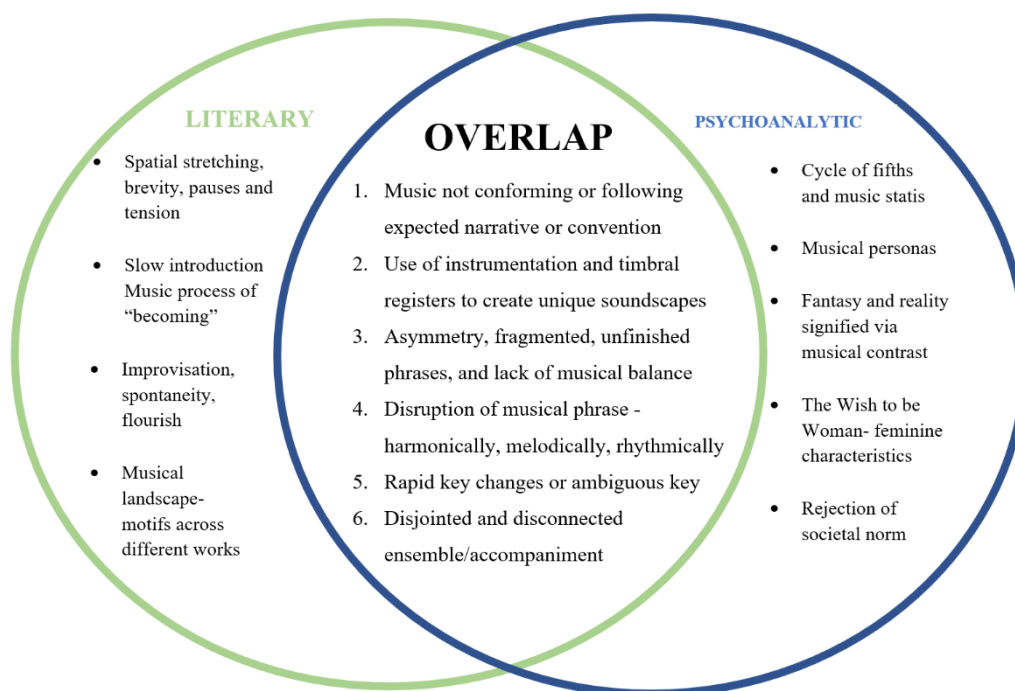


Figure 19 – Chart showing results of this study’s evaluation.

This overlap, previously unestablished and unrecognised in scholarship is consolidated by this research encompassing analytical, cultural, and holistic viewpoints. This study has added further to the cultural and historical context in which these signifiers can be understood within Schubert’s music, and well as more broadly musically and artistically.

Many musicologists have also identified the above signifiers including use of orchestral idiom, instrumentation, and exoticism as ways in which composers accompany fantastical scenes within films and visual narratives. (Elferen 2013; Kamp and Sweeny 2020; Plank 2020) One may remark that these similarities are a result of analysis from a twenty-first century viewpoint. However, the fact that our historical and contextual investigation into nineteenth century aesthetics around ideas of fantasy and the uncanny has revealed that such scholars, thinkers, and artists of the time were exploring fantasy and the uncanny in these ways means that findings become far more significant. Based on the knowledge this study has revealed, future scholarship then, should potentially examine how sound and modern music can act as active agents for portraying fantasy and the uncanny or how the concepts can be redefined as their own artistic aesthetics and experiences.

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