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Hearing an Old Story in a New Way: An Analysis of Loewe's *Erlkönig*

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Abstract. Carl Loewe is relatively unknown today, but he was well respected throughout Europe during his lifetime. Loewe's setting of Goethe's "Erlkönig," dating from 1817–1818, became his best-known composition; of the approximately 100 known *Erlkönig* settings, it is second only to Schubert's in fame. Unfortunately, Loewe's *Erlkönig* setting has often been denigrated simply because it is not Schubert's. Rather than engaging in a misguided attempt to prove the inherent superiority of either setting, this article will address Loewe's music on its own terms. As Loewe himself reportedly proclaimed, there is more than one way to set a text.

Keywords and phrases: Loewe, *Erlkönig*, Schubert, text setting, analysis.

Johann von Goethe's evocative "Erlkönig" was among his most popular poems. Modern musicians who become acquainted with the work solely through Schubert's famous *Erlkönig* setting may be interested to know that the title character actually originated in a folk song. In 1778–1779, German author and philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder, who believed that the essential nature of humankind was transmitted through folk culture, published an extraordinary collection of folk song texts from around the world. Herder also took the liberty of including some of his own original verses, as well as some by the young Goethe. Knowing he had been represented, Goethe, of course, perused the collection and came across a Danish folk song that Herder had abridged (and mistranslated) as "Erlkönig's Tochter"—Erlking's daughter.[1] Evidently inspired by the eerie story, Goethe wrote his own version, borrowing the folksong's meter, rhyme scheme, and various phrases, including the dramatic closing words.

Goethe published his "Erlkönig" in 1781, and the first known musical setting was performed only a year later as the opening number of the Singspiel *Die Fischerin*, with music by Corona Schröter, who also performed the leading role.[2] Captivated by the chilling story's images, and perhaps responding to the poem's folk-song origins, at least one hundred composers were inspired to set Goethe's text.[3] (In fact, August Wilhelm Ambros observed in 1874 that *Erlkönig* settings were as ubiquitous in the nineteenth century as *L'homme armé* quotations had been during the Renaissance.[4]) Franz Schubert's version from 1815, the most famous of all settings, was by no means the first.[5]

Carl Loewe, relatively unknown today, was well respected throughout Europe during his lifetime, both as a

[1] Herder mistakenly guessed that "Eller" in the Danish word *Ellerkong* was equivalent to the German "Erle," meaning "alder trees," when in fact it is an archaic word for "elves."

[2] Corona Schröter was a singer and actress who also performed in other Goethe Singspiele. Goethe himself invited Schröter to Weimar in 1776.

[3] Among these composers were Bernhard Klein, Karl Friedrich Zelter, Andreas Romberg, and Louis Spohr; Beethoven also sketched a setting.

[4] Ambros (1874, 68).

[5] Gibbs (1995) provides a detailed and fascinating account of the *Erlkönig* background, although his primary focus is Schubert's famous setting.

composer and as a singer. Loewe was interested in supernatural themes early in his career, so it was almost inevitable that he, too, would be drawn to Goethe's "Erlkönig." Loewe's setting, dating from 1817–1818, became his best-known composition; of all *Erlkönig* settings, it is second only to Schubert's in fame. Unfortunately, Loewe's *Erlkönig* setting has often been denigrated simply because it is not Schubert's, and far too many musicians have overlooked Loewe's ingenious song because they reflexively assume that Schubert's setting eclipses all others. In my opinion, attempts to prove the inherent superiority of either setting are misguided: the two composers simply had different musical stories to tell, and both are well worth hearing.

To be sure, Schubert's and Loewe's renditions invite comparisons. These two not-yet-famous song composers were approximately the same age (Loewe was one year older), and not only were their *Erlkönig* settings written almost contemporaneously, but coincidentally each was published as Opus 1, in 1821 and 1824, respectively.[6] Although Schubert and Loewe certainly came to know one another's settings eventually, they probably composed their versions independently. Stories suggesting that Loewe saw Schubert's setting in manuscript form and decided that he could improve upon it seem to stem from Loewe's daughter Julie, whose claims have since been discredited.[7]

Nonetheless, the two songs do have several striking musical similarities that are occasionally interpreted as evidence that Loewe examined Schubert's setting before attempting his own: both are in G minor, both employ a compound meter, and both use different vocal ranges to help differentiate the father and son. The identical choice of key is sometimes presented as hard evidence of Schubert's influence on Loewe, but a more likely explanation is that both composers were familiar with Johann Friedrich Reichardt's well-known version, also in G minor. In fact, most of the early *Erlkönig* settings were in either G or D minor. Similarly, many previous settings were written in compound meters, which is not at all surprising given the poem's iambic (and occasionally amphibrachic) tetrameter. The differentiated vocal ranges were innovative, but again the poem itself invites this strategy.

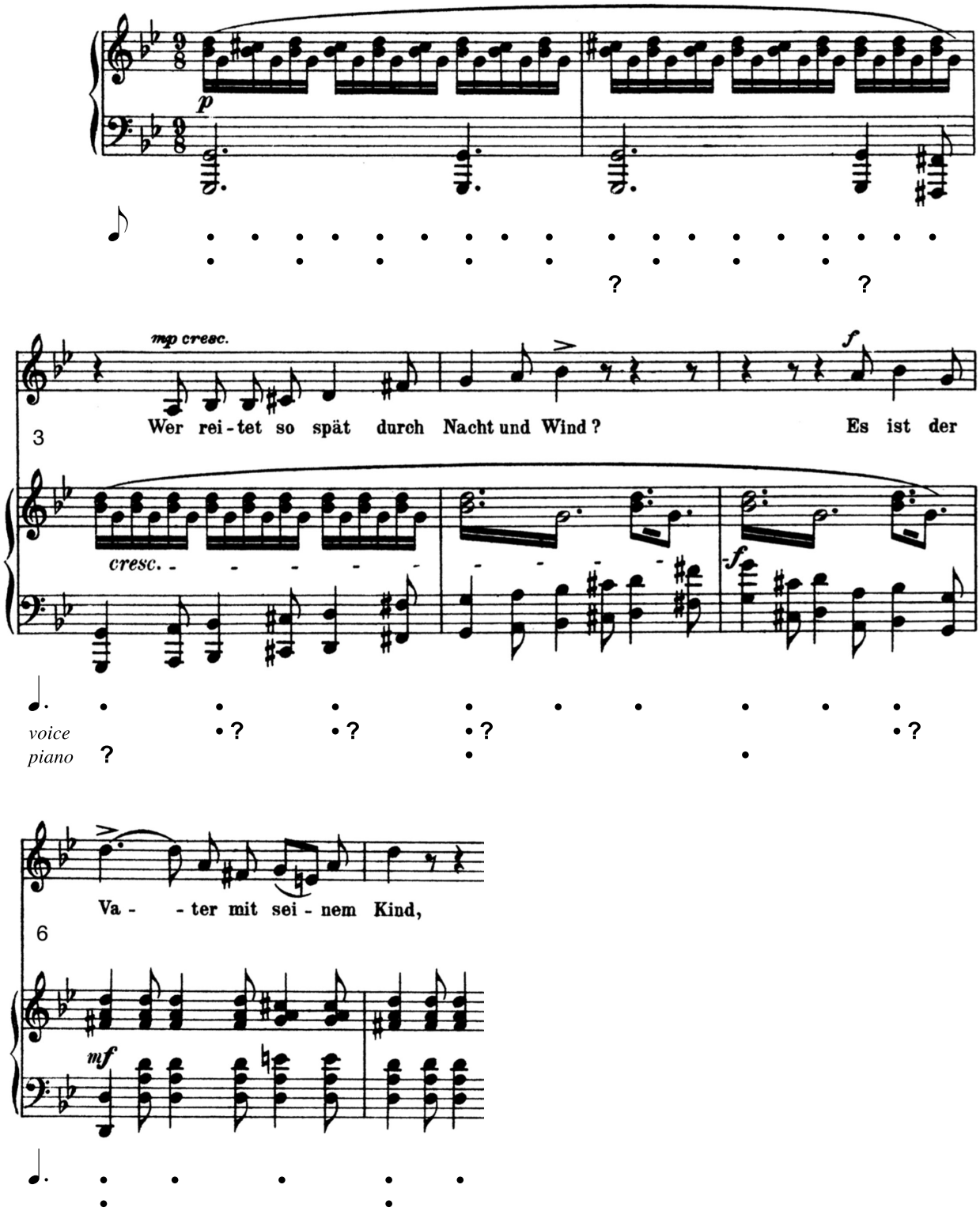
Of course, there are also significant differences between the two songs, some of which are apparent even from the opening measures. Loewe's introduction sets the scene more gently than does Schubert's, focusing primarily on the dark and misty atmosphere. Loewe's father and son emerge from the musical fog before our very eyes as the prevailing meter and key are gradually clarified. As shown in Example 1, the initial pattern of four sixteenth notes in the pianist's right hand (mm. 1–2) suggests a simple meter, but this sense of simple meter is soon undermined by the bass note on the downbeat of m. 2, which coincides with the third (rather than the first) sixteenth note of the pattern. The song's compound meter is revealed at the end of the measure when this conflict is eliminated: the right-hand pattern is reduced to two sixteenth notes and the left hand adopts the repeated ♩♪ rhythmic pattern that is typical in compound meters. In the context of this poem, the ♩♪ pattern surely represents the distant galloping horse as it approaches, still unseen.

Even when the compound meter becomes clear, the listener cannot yet discriminate strong and weak beats. The onset of the horse's rhythm (m. 2, beat 3) might briefly be interpreted as a strong beat, but the written downbeat gains perceptual strength when the bass line from m. 3 is repeated up an octave in m. 4. While the piano locks into the prevailing $\frac{9}{8}$ meter, however, the vocal entrance obscures the downbeat to some extent: the first poetic line begins on a pickup to beat 2 (m. 3), and next poetic line begins on a pickup to beat 3 (m. 4). The meter is not completely clarified until m. 5: at the moment the narrator identifies the characters, the harmony progresses from the tonic for the first time and the tremolos evaporate, allowing the father and son to ride into a musical clearing.

Once we focus on the human characters, Loewe's horse fades into the musical background; it remains discernible, but we hear nothing akin to Schubert's thunderous hoof beats until the frantic gallop home at the end of the song. The most striking difference between the two settings, however, is the treatment of the Erlking himself. Loewe's Erlking, like Schubert's, enters in a major key and eventually shifts to minor when he decides to use force, but his musical character could not be more different. Far from sounding charming or inviting, his G-major entrance is instead profoundly disturbing. This surprisingly unsettling effect of the parallel major illustrates a concept Freud would later describe as *das Unheimliche* ("the uncanny")—something strangely familiar but incongruous, as opposed to merely mysterious. We are attracted to G major and yet simultaneously repulsed by it, and this ambivalence inspires anxiety and even horror. The accompaniment's shift to *una corda* at the arrival of G major, and its corresponding shift back to *tutte corde* upon the return of G minor, underscores the mode's alien nature. The Erlking's major mode is not comforting, but rather alarming; we immediately see through his flimsy disguise.

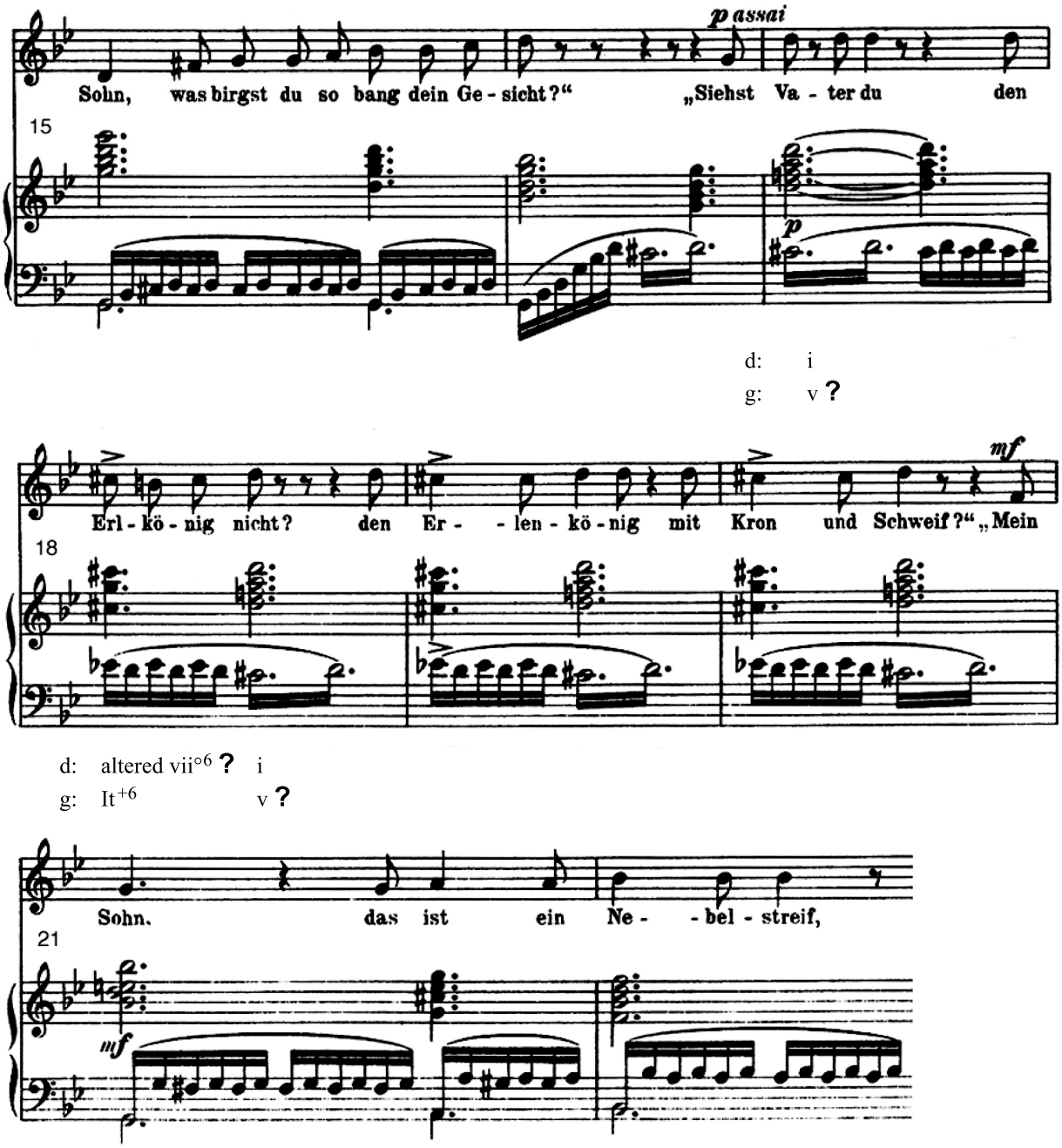
Loewe completely suppresses harmonic motion during these passages, giving the Erlking a certain hovering quality. Perhaps counterintuitively, Loewe's exclusive use of the

[6] The publication of Schubert's *Erlkönig* was financed by Schubert's friends, while Loewe's Op. 1 (*Erlkönig*, *Edward*, and *The Landlady's Little Daughter*) was paid for by musicologist Adolf Bernhard Marx.
[7] West ("Carl Loewe").



Example 1. Metrical ambiguity in mm. 1–5 conveys poor visibility and unknown characters.

tonic may contribute to the listener's sense of apprehension, because any chord might come next—in stark contrast with standing on the dominant, which would reassuringly telegraph an imminent return to the tonic. The listener senses that *something* is about to transpire, but it is not possible to predict precisely what it will be, although the uncanny

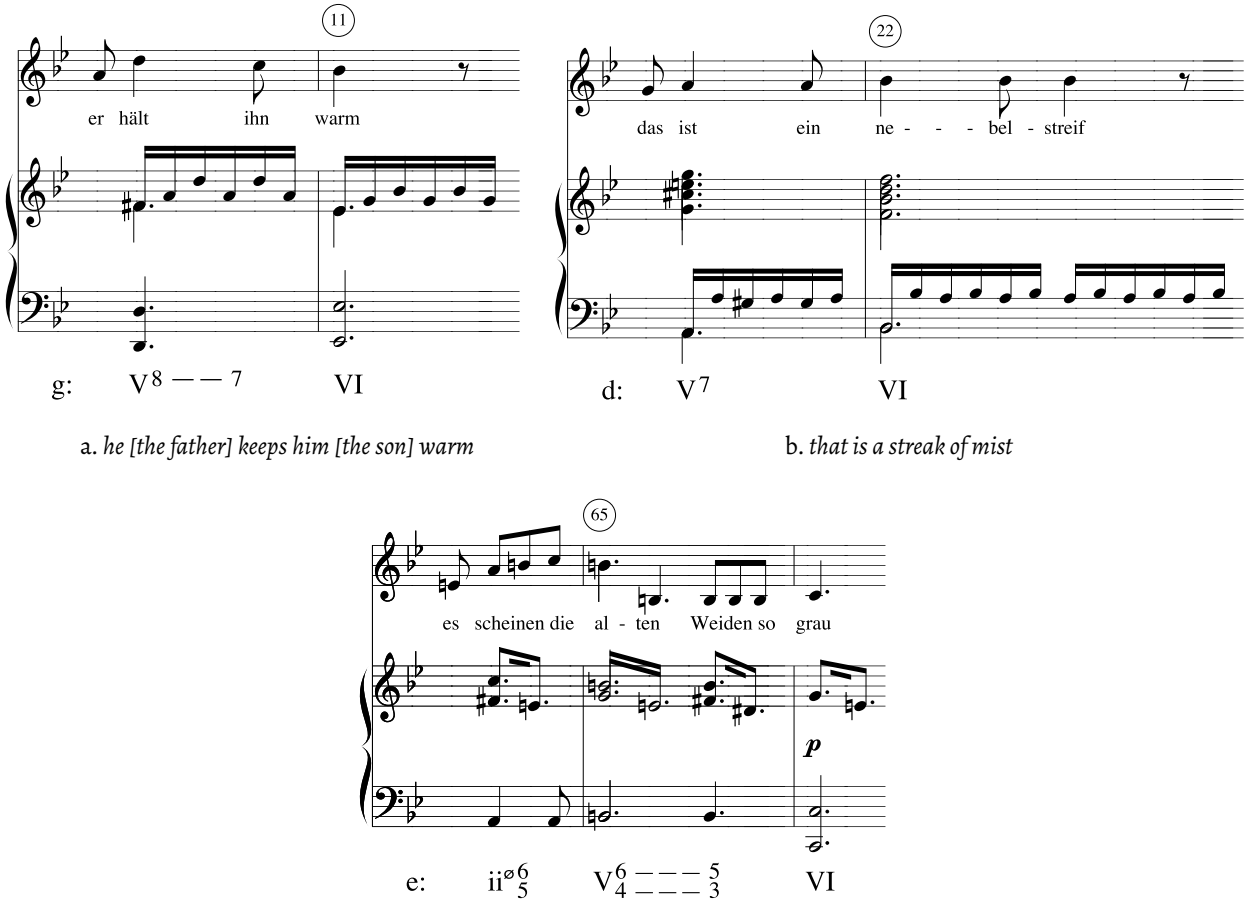


Example 2. Father's initial entrance in G minor, son's tonally ambiguous initial entrance, and father's response in D minor.

character of the Erlking's music suggests an ominous turn of events. All of the characters are musically distinct, but the Erlking's separation from the others is so extraordinary that he inhabits a different musical realm; we hear him as almost literally otherworldly. It is also worth noting that harp-like triadic arpeggiation had been established by the nineteenth century as a symbol representing the siren's song, and the parallel Loewe draws through the Erking's constantly arpeggiating melody is clear enough: like the siren, the Erlking is a seductive villain—a supernatural being who attempts to lure an innocent victim to his death.[8]

Loewe's harmonic portrayal of the father and son is comparatively subtle. The father's only G-minor passage is his initial entrance in m. 15 (Example 2), when he inquires why the boy is hiding his face. In other words, the father only

[8] Gibbs (1995, 131) makes this claim, citing research by Brigitte Massin.



a. *he [the father] keeps him [the son] warm*

b. *that is a streak of mist*

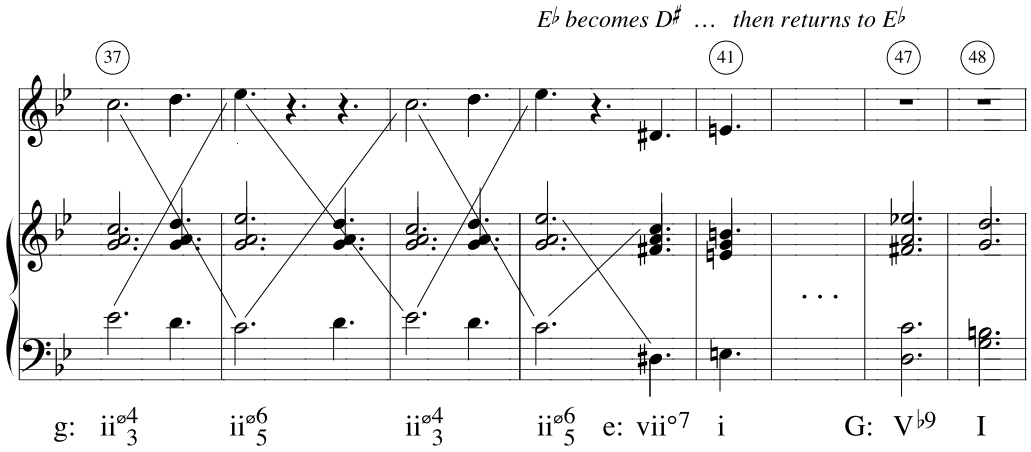
c. *the old willows look so grey*

Example 3. Reassuring text associated with deceptive cadences.

sings in the prevailing tonic while trying to ascertain what is amiss. The son's initial entrance in m. 17 is tonally ambiguous as he responds, "Don't you see the Erlking?" The sudden introduction of F♮ and C♯ suggests a shift toward D minor, yet the E♭ beginning in m. 18 points back to G minor. Either an Italian augmented-sixth chord is resolving to a minor dominant, or an unusual altered form of the leading-tone triad is resolving to the tonic. What is the father to make of this? Is the son suffering from a dangerous fever or just an overactive imagination? Is there genuine danger in the woods or just some harmless mist? Are we in G minor or D minor?

The father guesses D minor, initiating a standard cadential formula that leads first to a deceptive cadence in m. 22 and then to a perfect authentic cadence two measures later. As shown in Example 3, Loewe writes deceptive cadences exclusively in association with comforting words: the narrator's reference to keeping the child warm in m. 11, the father's reassurance that the son sees only a streak of mist in m. 22, and his later calming explanation that the son has mistaken some old grey willows for the Erlking in m. 66. It cannot be coincidental that the poem's positive and consoling passages are consistently undercut by these deceptive resolutions. Unfortunately, when the D-minor triad is transformed into a major–minor seventh chord (that is, back into an unambiguous dominant) after the father's cadence, we realize that he was wrong: the song is still in G, and the son is really in danger, because this dominant seventh chord in m. 25 prepares the Erlking's first entrance.

The next time we hear the son (in m. 37, depicted in Example 4), his initial uncertainty has disappeared and the music is firmly in G minor. He is sure the Erlking is stalking him, but he is powerless to defend himself. Throughout his next two entrances, the piteous son can only fret over a pre-dominant expansion with repeated voice exchanges in the outer parts. I refer to this distinctive pattern as the "worrying chords" because their noticeable rep-



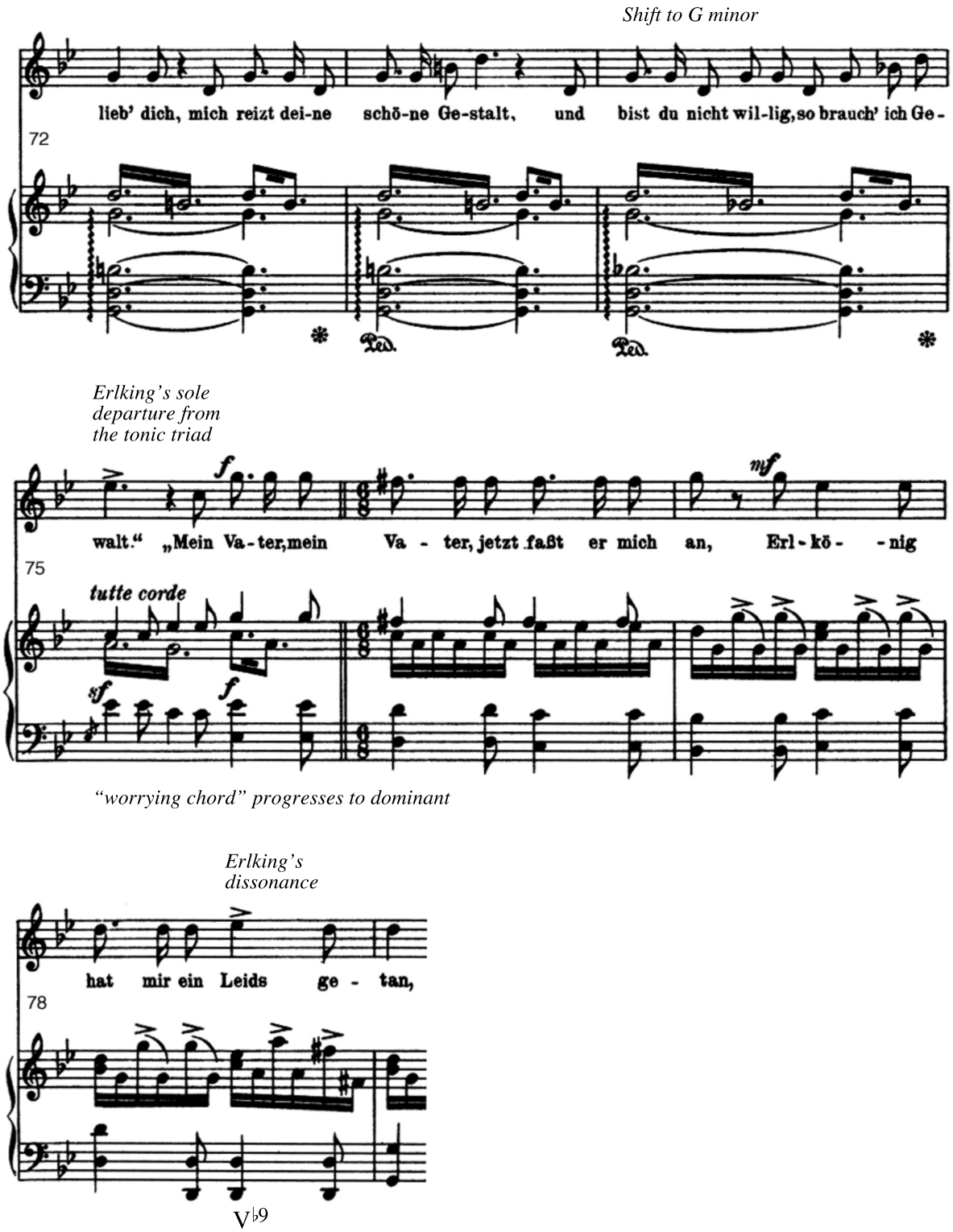
Example 4. Son's recurring pre-dominant expansion ("worrying chords"), father's interpretation of E♭ as D♯, and eventual restoration of E♭ in Erlking's ominous V♭9 chord (texture simplified; repeated in mm. 59–70).

etition underscores the boy's nervous obsession. The worrying chords do not resolve, and the listener may wonder whether the son is unable to lead to a cadence, or whether he is in fact deliberately *avoiding* a cadence—perhaps realizing that the ultimate conclusion of this drama will be his own demise.

The father's response to the worrying chords is curious and invites many interpretations. In a pitch-class sense, there is yet another voice exchange as the father brings his son's high E♭ down an octave to D♯ in m. 40 (one of the few diminished-ninth leaps in the tonal repertoire). Along with the respelling is a subtle harmonic change as Loewe transforms the $^{\varnothing 6}_{5}$ chord into a fully-diminished seventh chord, thereby propelling the song into E minor. Does the father deliberately shift away from G minor in an attempt to improve their circumstances, or does he simply not understand the situation—that is, does he willfully *re*interpret or unwittingly *mis*interpret the E♭ as D♯? Loewe corrects this spelling change in m. 47, conspicuously returning the E♭ to its original high register, this time as part of a dramatic dominant ninth chord. The harsh, biting sound of the minor ninth grabs our attention, and as this unusual and ominous chord resolves to G *major* rather than G *minor*, with a corresponding accompanimental shift to *una corda*, we realize that the father has inadvertently set up the Erlking yet again.

Because the Erlking's three most immediately audible features are the major mode, *una corda* accompaniment, and triadic arpeggiation, his second entrance (m. 50) sounds very similar to the first, but here Loewe deviates from a strict syllabic setting of the text. Thus, the music remains in $\frac{9}{8}$ rather than switching to $\frac{6}{8}$ as it did in the previous passage (mm. 26–36). Unsuccessful in his first attempt to woo the child, the Erlking has slightly adjusted his message, but to no avail: the apprehensive boy continues to worry over his pre-dominant in G minor, and the father—perhaps wary, or perhaps oblivious—continues to rationalize in the distant key of E minor. Although other interpretations are possible, my analysis of Loewe's musical setting leads me to infer that he believed the father in Goethe's poem does not recognize the danger until his final entrance. As described earlier, Loewe tends to set reassuring words with deceptive cadences, raising doubt in the listener's mind. The deceptive cadence in m. 66, however, is subtly different from earlier ones, and I believe the changes are meant to reflect the father's growing consternation. Right at the resolution, Loewe unexpectedly doubles the bass an octave below while simultaneously softening the dynamic, creating a sudden dark and ominous quality not heard in his previous verses.

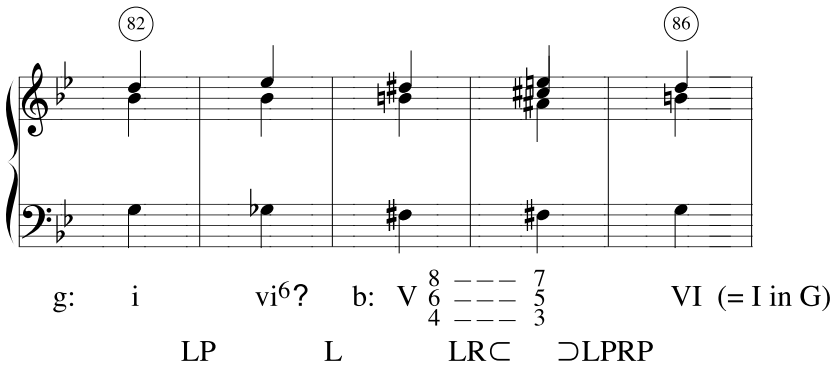
The Erlking's final entrance (Example 5) contains the poem's dramatic turning point, when our villain announces that he will use force to capture the boy. Casting aside his ineffective G-major disguise (m. 74), the Erlking makes his one and only departure from the tonic triad (m. 75). And where does he progress? To the son's high E♭—one naturally harmonized by the "worrying chord." The Erlking steals the chord along with the child, and for the first time we hear the pre-dominant worrying chord resolve to a dominant in the key of G minor. This harmonic progression has been expected—perhaps even inevitable—since the son first used the worrying chord to express his fear of the Erlking (m. 37). The chord is like a premonition come true. The terrified son now leaps to the highest note of the entire song and escalates to his only *forte* dynamic marking. The accented E♭ corresponding to the word *Leids* ("harm") in m. 78 (repeated in m. 80, not shown) clashes with the dominant chord in the accompaniment, creating another distinctive minor ninth that has been firmly associated with the Erlking. Now that his worst fears have been realized, the son is



Example 5. The Erlking departs from the G-major triad, seizing both the son and the son's chord, which finally progresses to a dominant.

finally able to progress beyond the pre-dominant, thereby propelling the music to a conclusive cadence for the first time.

Loewe presumably envisioned the father spurring on his horse at m. 81: the hoofbeat rhythm suddenly gains prominence, and the harmony takes us on a wild ride in-



Example 6. Deliberately disorienting harmony during the wild ride home (texture simplified). The deceptive resolution of the dominant seventh sets up the Erlking's characteristic G-major triad.[9]

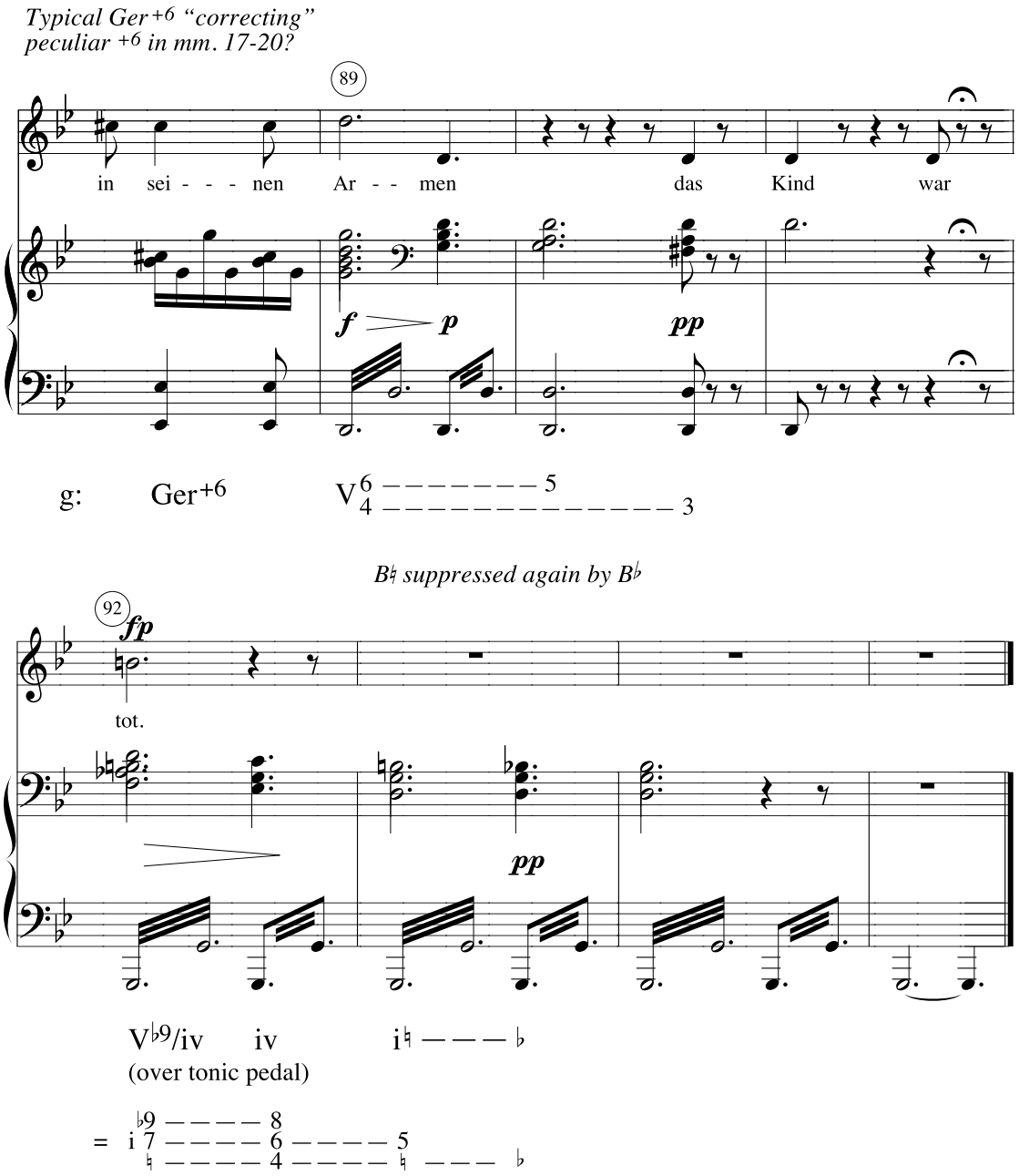
deed. In marked contrast to the rest of the song, the chords in mm. 82–85 are driven more by voice leading than by harmonic function. As shown in Example 6, the outer voices move in contrary motion by half-step, transforming the G-minor triad into an E♭-minor triad (in neo-Riemannian terms, an LP transformation). The inner voice then moves by half-step, leading to a B-major triad through a neo-Riemannian L transformation. Loewe retains the bass's F♯ and moves the upper voices by step into an F♯ dominant seventh chord, which in turn resolves deceptively to a G-major triad. Only at this point does the listener retrospectively realize that the B-major chord in m. 84 was actually a cadential $^{6}_{4}$—something there was no reason to suspect at the time, particularly since m. 84 is hypermetrically weak.

A variety of analytical nomenclature may be applied to mm. 82–86, but no matter which approach we prefer, Loewe's compositional intent for this passage is clear: the father is desperately trying to save his son, and his radical departure from the established figurative (and perhaps literal) pathway is meant to be disorienting. Notice that as he attempts to escape from the Erlking and the key of G, the father once again interprets E♭ as D♯ and it almost works. As the D♯ rises to E♮, the frantic riders nearly make it to the key of B, but the deceptive resolution marks a fatal wrong turn in m. 86, where they once again confront the Erlking's evil G-major triad.

Although the Erlking does not speak again at the end of the poem, we feel his presence musically. As we learn that the child is dead at the structural cadence in m. 92 (shown in Example 7), Loewe elides the tonic and writes V♭9/iv instead. A dominant chord with a flat ninth has served as a harbinger of evil on two previous occasions (refer back to Example 4), and the Erlking's characteristic B♮ is prominent and unsettling as the vocalist's final note. The remaining harmony in the accompaniment is equally striking and perhaps more perplexing. Loewe could have concluded on the downbeat of m. 93 with the plagal resolution to a G-major triad, which would suitably represent the Erlking's victory, but might have been misunderstood as a happy ending. A resolution direction to a G-minor triad in the same location would have been more conventional, but Loewe instead writes the deliberately bizarre combination of the major tonic followed by the minor tonic. The motion from B♮ to B♭ is like a final, but ultimately futile, effort to suppress the uncanny G major.

I hope that my analysis debunks some unfounded criticism that has been directed at Loewe's *Erlkönig*. For instances, Sams and Johnson (2015) declare that Loewe creates an "ingratiating depiction of the supernatural," undoubtedly alluding to the Erlking's major mode. However, I contend that Loewe's striking use of the parallel major is uncanny and far from appealing. Furthermore, given that Schubert also set his Erlking primarily in major keys, one might reasonably wonder why Sams and Johnson do not find Schubert's Erlking similarly "ingratiating." Loewe is also faulted for failing to employ a central unifying motive, but I find his *Erlkönig* no less unified than Schubert's. Schubert did indeed incorporate a recurring motive on the musical surface, but my analysis of Loewe's setting shows similarly laudable features such as his intriguing use of E♭ (as a creator of ambiguity, then a symbol both of danger and of fear, as a misinterpreted or reinterpreted element, and finally as the representation of physical force). West's ("Carl Loewe") declaration that Loewe's song shows "a striking absence of organic musical development" does not ring

[9] Julian Hook provides a way to relate chords of different cardinality, expanding the repertoire of Riemannian transformations through the concept of inclusion (e.g., ⊃ indicates a triadic subset of the preceding seventh chord). He describes harmonic successions such as those in mm. 84–85 as cross-type transformations; see Hook (2002).



Example 7. Structural cadence: the elided tonic allows for one final appearance of both the Erlking's otherworldly V♭9 chord and also the eerie B♮.

true. Even complaints that Loewe reused musical passages seem somewhat arbitrary (how many composers never repeat passages?) and completely ignore the fact that, at the time, his setting was considered far more appropriate than Schubert's for a ballad.[10]

My goal, as explained earlier, is not to argue for the superiority of one setting, but rather to set aside preconceptions of compositional ability and consider Loewe's *Erlkönig* on its own merits. As Loewe himself reportedly proclaimed, there is more than one way to set a text.

[10] Goethe himself did not particularly like Schubert's setting. He heard Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient perform Schubert's *Erlkönig* in 1830 and enjoyed the performance, but noted that the sensation of the galloping horse and the generally apprehensive atmosphere were a bit overwhelming.

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