

## Dreams of Childhood: The Romantic Quest for the Innocent Imagination in Music\*

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### Introduction

“In the nineteenth century, childhood became the time and fantasy the place of the divine.”<sup>1</sup> Though referring specifically to the rise of children’s fantasy literature, David Sandner thus defines a widespread Romantic preoccupation: the childhood imagination and the conception of innocence as a “fantastic” ideal. While existing research into Romantic poetry and literature reveals the depth and maturity of Romantic conceptions of the childhood imagination and the search for prelapsarian innocence as one of the underlying tenets of Romanticism, there is little research on the influence of such ideas on music, particularly given the intimate connection between the arts in the nineteenth century. Perhaps dismissed as charming but insignificant offshoots of music history, the relative formal and melodic simplicity of *Märchenoper* and Schumann’s *Kinderszenen*, both examined in this essay, have by and large consigned them to the

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\* The image of Alice is kindly supplied and reproduced courtesy of Goldmark Gallery, <http://www.johntenniel.com>.

<sup>1</sup> David Sandner, *The Fantastic Sublime: Romanticism and Transcendence in Nineteenth-Century Children’s Fantasy Literature* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996), 38.

margins of history. Similarly, childhood is viewed as only an incidental aspect in works otherwise lauded and studied in depth: the success of Hoffmann's opera *Undine* and Schubert's lied *Erlkönig* has never been attributed to their portrayals of childhood, other formal and dramatic innovations having claimed the attention of scholars.

This essay aims to demonstrate the multivalent and complex ways in which Romantic composers engaged with contemporary ideas about childhood; specifically, the especial importance of the childhood *imagination*, artists during this time being increasingly interested in the power of music to depict individual perception and psychological experience. Towards this aim I have analysed a variety of works that are either clearly centred on childhood or which make explicit reference to it through the text or subject matter. Reviewing the dominant Romantic beliefs regarding childhood arising in various literary, poetic and historic sources, I demonstrate through close analysis how the musical aesthetic has been shaped by these Romantic conceptions of childhood.<sup>2</sup> In the first half of the essay, divine wonderment and the fragility of innocence thus form the backdrop to my readings of Humperdinck's *Hänsel und Gretel* and Schubert's *Erlkönig*. However, music of course does more than merely reflect ideas established in other art forms. The power of music to evoke the past, and to create inner or imagined worlds through sound, makes it uniquely suited to expressing and attempting to recreate the imaginative experience of childhood, a purpose fulfilled in Schumann's *Kinderszenen*, Brahms's *Heimweh Lieder* and, I also argue, Hoffmann's opera *Undine*. Guided by literature of Jean Paul Richter<sup>3</sup> and E.T.A Hoffmann, I analyse each composer's attempt to access an idealised, "fantastic" childhood through music, linking their differing musical approaches to their perspectives on the relationship between childhood, past, present and musical experience.

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<sup>2</sup> Although my analysis includes ideas arising in numerous countries, the origins and details of these national and cultural differences are beyond the scope of this essay. My focus instead is upon the many commonalities in the attitudes towards childhood of various artists and authors throughout Europe during the nineteenth century. Examining and comparing these builds a picture of some of the major, if not completely universal, preoccupations underlying the Romanticisation of childhood that inform the musical works covered.

<sup>3</sup> Berthold Hoeckner, "Schumann and Romantic Distance," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 50 (1997): 66.

These analyses and comparisons reveal some of the common concerns that lie at the heart of musical representations of childhood: the elevation of the innocent childhood imagination and the conflict between adult and child worlds. Perhaps even more revealing is the rich variety of perspectives adopted by different composers. In the German operatic genre of *Märchenoper*, the innocent fantasy and dreams of children act as a gateway into the sublime. However, the idealisation of childhood creates a gulf between the past and the faded reality of adulthood, and composers' attempts to explore or bridge this gulf gave rise to the creation of other fantastic worlds. For the child in Schubert's lied *Erlkönig*, the adult reality of death takes on the bewildering form of a contradictory, supernatural vision. For the adult in works by Schumann and Brahms, music, rather than restoring the perfect memory of childhood, reduces childhood to an elusive and fragmented fantasy. E. T. A. Hoffmann reconciles these opposing worlds in his writings and his opera *Undine*, in which fairytale and the childlike imagination transcend time and mortality and are even portrayed as being central to the adult experience of music. Indeed, reviewing just this small range of works confirms that the Romantic search for childhood innocence in music, far from being simplistic, interweaves many of the defining aspects of Romanticism: transcendence, the imagination, fantasy and the sublime.

### **The idealisation of wonderment and the emergence of Märchenoper**

Disillusioned by the political idealism and adult corruption which drove multiple failed revolutions, the Reign of Terror and the march of Industrialisation, many Romantics instead turned towards childhood as a source of enlightenment and innocence,<sup>4</sup> re-evaluating childlike dreaming and wonderment as positive forces rather than trivial fancies to be brought into line by adult reason. In Wordsworth's *Ode: Intimation of Immortality*, completed in 1804, these

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<sup>4</sup>Sandner, 6–7.

qualities even act as a window into sublime truth; the child, for whom the earth has “the glory and the freshness of a dream,”<sup>5</sup> is exulted as a “Mighty Prophet! Seer blest!”<sup>6</sup> This elevation of the child’s imagination spread from English poetry, fuelling the rise of fantasy and fairytale collections specifically for children throughout the century. George MacDonald, the author of many such fairytales, stressed this belief in children’s unique insight as the basis of his stories: “Bacon says that ‘wonder,’ that faculty of the mind especially attendant on the child-like imagination, ‘is the seed of knowledge.’”<sup>7</sup> Towards the end of the century, these currents infiltrated even the far-off realm of German opera. In the wake of Wagner’s death in 1883 and fuelled by the growing dissatisfaction of “disillusioned intellectuals” with the materialism and corruption they perceived around them, the grandiose treatment of Germanic folklore and fairytale in Wagnerian opera finally gave way to the naive simplicity of *Märchenoper*, a new genre of opera based on children’s fairytales championed by Siegfried Wagner and Engelbert Humperdinck.<sup>8</sup> The innocent worlds of wonderment portrayed in children’s fairytales and these operas excised the incest, cruelty, rape and moral ambiguity from the folklore from which they were derived,<sup>9</sup> tailoring them instead to the childhood imagination so admired by adults.

The archetype of *Märchenoper* is Humperdinck’s *Hänsel und Gretel* (1892), based on the fairytale by Hans Christian Andersen. Act II Scene 2, in which the two children go to sleep in the forest, epitomises the Romantic idealisation of the childhood imagination. The scene places the listener firmly in the realm of the children’s fantastic reverie. The folk-like melody of the Sandman, the “sleep-fairy” who brings good dreams, is accompanied by a harp, high tremolo strings and woodwind arpeggiated figures which gently usher

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<sup>5</sup> William Wordsworth, “Ode: Intimations of Immortality,” *Wordsworth, Poetry & Prose*, ed. D.N. Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 111, line 5.

<sup>6</sup> William Wordsworth, 115, line 114.

<sup>7</sup> George MacDonald, “The Imagination: Its Functions and its Culture,” In *A Dish of Orts* (The Pennsylvania State University, 2006), 14, <http://www2.hn.psu.edu/faculty/jmanis/gmacdonald/a-dish-of-orts.pdf> (accessed 9 Feb 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Roger Parker, ed., *The Oxford History of Opera* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 155.

<sup>9</sup> Sandner, 15.

the children into a dream-world. In the following scene once they fall asleep, chromatic modulations which deter cadences, such as the sudden shift from E major to F major in Fig. 1, highlight the surrealism of the dream and the constant discovery and wonderment with which they react to their experience. The dream itself is a striking depiction of how this fantastic reverie offers a gateway into the sublime. After the children sing a prayer set to a chorale-like tune about guardian angels (Fig. 2), they fall asleep and fourteen angels descend onto the stage, arranging themselves around the children and filling the stage with “intense light.”<sup>10</sup> Descending *pianissimo* chords beginning in the uppermost register of the strings depict the angels’ descent, and along with the “staircase vanishing in perspective”<sup>11</sup> on stage intimate the limitlessness of the world unlocked by the children’s imagination. As the children become increasingly aware of their transformed surroundings, the music builds through successive sequences culminating in the triumphant return of the chorale theme, transformed with overwhelming immediacy: *fortissimo*, with timpani, agitated strings and full brass (Fig. 3). In Humperdinck’s vision of childhood, fantasy offers more than a fleeting, distant image: the innocent simplicity of both the text and the music of the chorale in this scene are transformed by the child’s reverie into a direct experience of a divine reality.

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<sup>10</sup> Adelheid Wette and Constance Bache, “Hänsel und Gretel,” in *The Authentic Librettos of the French and German Operas* (New York: Arvo Press, 1980), 489.

<sup>11</sup> Wette, 489.

**Figure 1** Humperdinck, *Hänsel und Gretel*: from Act II Scene 3. Only flute and oboe parts shown.

Fl. *p*

Hb. *p*

*p*

*p*

1.

Fl. *p*

2.

*p*

*p*

**Figure 2** Humperdinck *Hänsel und Gretel*: from Act II Scene 2, “When at night I go to sleep, fourteen angels watch do keep...”

(Mit halber Stimme)

Gretel.

Abends, will ich schlafen gehn, vierzehn Englein um mich stehn: zwei zu meinen Häup - ten

Hänsel

Abends, will ich schlafen gehn, vierzehn Englein um mich stehn: zwei zu meinen Häup - ten,

**Figure 3** Humperdinck, *Hänsel und Gretel*: from Act II Scene 3. Only brass and string parts shown, with transformation of the children's chorale highlighted.

The musical score consists of two systems of staves. The first system includes Horns (Hr.), Trumpets (Trpf.), and Trombones (VI.). The second system includes Horns (Hr.), Violins (Vc.), and Contrabasses (Cb.). Dynamics range from fortissimo (ff) to piano (p). The children's chorale transformation is highlighted in the original image.

### Innocence disturbed and fantastic terrors

Whereas *Hänsel und Gretel* takes place entirely within an insular, constructed world, other Romantics tapped into the more disturbing aspects of the child's experience of the fantastic to explore the clash between childhood and a sinister adult reality. In keeping with his picturesque image of childhood, the thorny issue of death is granted only the most simplistic treatment in *Hänsel und Gretel*. As the children push the witch into the oven in Act III, they are accompanied by a cymbal crash and *fortissimo* trombones, but the macabre moment is overtaken only a few bars later by a triumphant, lively waltz. In contrast, William Blake portrays childhood, not as a cosy escape, but as an idyll impinged upon by a dark and often brutal adult world in

his collection of poems *Songs of Innocence* (1789).<sup>12</sup> The child in “A Little Boy Lost” encounters no angels or sleep-fairies, only abandonment and a dark, cold night,<sup>13</sup> while sleeping children in the poem “Night” are threatened by mysterious beasts, “wolves and tigers” which “howl for prey.”<sup>14</sup> The juxtaposition of childlike innocence and a complex adult reality encompassing death is most vivid in “The Tiger,” from *Songs of Experience* (1794), in which such a beast is confronted by the speaker:

What the hammer? what the chain?  
 In what furnace was thy brain?  
 What the anvil? what dread grasp  
 Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

When the stars threw down their spears,  
 And watered heaven with their tears,  
 Did He smile His work to see?  
 Did He who made the lamb make thee?<sup>15</sup>

While the last line echoes “The Lamb” from *Songs of Innocence*, in which a “little child” tenderly likens God to itself,<sup>16</sup> the “Tiger” here is the brutal challenge offered by life experience to that view, a creature of violence and “deadly terror” which reveals itself to be as integral to God’s creation as any lamb, no longer a dim shadow

<sup>12</sup> Donald A. Dike, “The Difficult Innocence: Blake’s Songs and Pastoral,” *ELH* 28 (1961): 361.

<sup>13</sup> William Blake, “Little Boy Lost,” *Songs of Innocence*, lines 4-12, in *Songs of Innocences and Songs of Experience*, Project Gutenberg, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1934/1934-h/1934-h.htm> (accessed 15 February 2012). “The night was dark, no father was there./The child was wet with dew;/The mire was deep, and the child did weep./And away the vapour flew.”

<sup>14</sup> Blake, “Night,” *Songs of Innocence*, 113, line 25.

<sup>15</sup> Blake, “The Tiger,” *Songs of Experience*, lines 13–20, in *Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience*, Project Gutenberg.

<sup>16</sup> Blake, “The Lamb,” *Songs of Innocence*, 105, lines 15–16. “He is meek & he is mild, / He became a little child.”

lurking outside of a divine universe. The repetition and persistent questioning convey the speaker's crisis as his image of the mild, lamb-like God of childhood crumbles before one that is awe-inspiring, unfathomable and terrifying.<sup>17</sup>

It is this irreconcilability of innocent inexperience with a ruthless adult world which in other works provokes children's intense imaginative response to the unknown, the flipside to a heightened imaginative connection to the divine. Hence one child may envisage the Sandman as the charming fairy who sprinkles sand over children's eyes to give them good dreams, as in *Hänsel und Gretel*,<sup>18</sup> while another may be terrorised by Hoffmann's twisted perversion of the folkloric character in his story *The Sandman* (1814), in which the creature gouges out the eyes of children who do not go to bed.<sup>19</sup> In Victorian England, which replaced the preceding age of political turmoil with an era of strict social restraint and a "simplified code of morality," the dark side of the child's psyche became especially prominent in children's fantastic literature, as authors projected the fears and incongruities suppressed beneath a surface of order onto the nightmares of children.<sup>20</sup> In Lucy Clifford's *The New Mother* (1882), for example, a glass-eyed fake mother with a thrashing tail comes to punish two children who have broken a mirror,<sup>21</sup> an adult agent of Victorian moral "justice" reconceived as a bizarre and monstrous intrusion into the children's innocent universe.

Though written much earlier in 1818, Schubert's lied *Erkönig* set to the poem by Goethe is a similarly vivid musical depiction of the "terrors of the child"<sup>22</sup> in the face of an alien adult world. Death,

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<sup>17</sup> Dike, 138: "The celebrations of innocence [in Blake's *Songs of Innocence*] are disturbed by an effect of precarious vulnerability which anticipates and leads toward the disasters of *Songs of Experience*."

<sup>18</sup> Engelbert Humperdinck. *Hänsel und Gretel*, Act II Scene 2.

<sup>19</sup> E. T. A. Hoffmann, "The Sandman," in *Tales of Hoffmann*, trans. and ed. R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1982) 85–125.

<sup>20</sup> Stephen Prickett. *Victorian Fantasy* (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1979), 95.

<sup>21</sup> Prickett, 93.

<sup>22</sup> Christopher H. Gibbs, "Komm, geh' mit mir': Schubert's Uncanny *Erkönig*," *19th-Century Music* 19 (1995): 128.

incomprehensible to an innocent imagination, takes on the fantastic form of the Erlkönig, who coaxes children to their deaths. The child's repeated cries of "My father," each time higher than the last, accompanied in the piano by continuous triplets in octaves, communicate his terror (Fig. 4), while the Erlkönig himself, invisible to the father and existing only in the child's fantasy, is terrifying because of the contradictions he embodies: "frightening in its sweetness, deadly in its beauty."<sup>23</sup>

**Figure 4** Franz Schubert, *Erlkönig*, bb.68–72. "My Father, my Father, do you not see it?"

Singing of sweets and games and motherly comfort, his character enters in the major key, with a lyrical line and balanced phrases (Fig. 5). Several scholars have suggested the lullaby-like quality of this melody, its gentle repeated swells evocative of a "cradle-spell" from childhood.<sup>24</sup> Like the wolf in the Red Riding Hood fairytale, the Erlkönig confounds death with benign appearances, inhabiting the fantastic fissure between the child's innocent world and the disturbing reality of death.

<sup>23</sup> Gibbs, 130.

<sup>24</sup> Otto Erich Deutsch wrote "The cradle-spell that speaks from the melody, and yet at the same time the sinister note, which repels while the former entices, dramatizes the poet's picture." See his *Schubert: A Documentary Biography*, trans. Eric Blom (London: J. M. Dent, 1946), 254. Gibbs, (ibid, 132) wrote "alarmingly, the lullabies are sung here not by a loving parent but by an angel of death."

**Figure 5** Franz Schubert, *Erkönig*, bb.68–72. “Lovely child, come with me!”

The musical score for Franz Schubert's *Erkönig* (bb. 68–72) is presented in two systems. The first system shows the vocal line and the beginning of the piano accompaniment. The vocal line starts with a whole rest, followed by the lyrics "Du lie - - - bes Kind, komm, geh mit mir!". The piano accompaniment features a steady eighth-note pattern in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. Dynamic markings include "decresc." and "pp".

## Recollecting childhood: a lost paradise

The discrepancy between child and adult worlds is further thrown into relief in the efforts of artists to recover a “lost” childhood in their work, reaching into the past through the lens of adult memory. In literature, a particularly strong connection was forged between children and music. For a character in E. T. A. Hoffmann’s collection of stories *Kreisleriana*, music from the past becomes inextricable from the memory of a childhood fairytale: “on hearing the song I thought of my beloved mosses, and soon the two seemed to be one and the same.”<sup>25</sup> In the final story of *Fliegeljahre* by Jean Paul Richter, a writer greatly admired by Schumann, a child figure is literally sublimated as music: “the departing child turned into a small evening glow . . . and,

<sup>25</sup> E. T. A. Hoffmann, “Kreisleriana,” in *E. T. A. Hoffmann’s Musical Writings: Kreisleriana, The Poet and the Composer, Music Criticism*, ed. David Charlton, trans. Martyn Clarke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 162.

finally, further and further into the distance, it faded into the tone of a flute or a Philomena.”<sup>26</sup> For Romantics, music thus offered the possibility of continuity between past and present experience, a wordless language which could restore the glory of one’s childhood. The conflict of child and adult perspectives, however, complicates the attempt to recapture this fallen paradise. Brahms communicates this struggle in the three *Heimweh* lieder of op. 63, in which the protagonist laments the impossibility of returning to his idyllic past. The music of the third song echoes the innocence of the text, which begins “As a boy I saw flowers blossoming,” with a folk-like melody in duple-time accompanied by a gentle, regular accompaniment. Yet almost immediately the troubled memory of the protagonist, singing “I don’t know any more, what was it, actually?”, distorts the piano’s figuration with disoriented, rapid chromatic progressions (Fig. 6). According to Hirsch, such instances of harmonic complexity, at odds with the simple worlds described in the songs, “create an impression . . . of retreat to a deepened level of consciousness.”<sup>27</sup> Recollections are at best only imperfect shadows of childhood, with the ambiguity and interiority of adult memory adding yet another layer of fantasy to the Romantic vision of childhood.

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<sup>26</sup> Hoeckner, 66.

<sup>27</sup> Marjorie Hirsch, “The Spiral Journey Back Home: Brahms’s ‘Heimweh’ Lieder,” *The Journal of Musicology* 22 (2005): 472.

**Figure 6** Johannes Brahms, *Heimweh III*, bb. 1–6. “As a boy I saw flowers blossoming/ I don’t know any more, what was it, actually?”

Etwas langsam.

Ich sah als Kna - be

*p* *dolce*

Blu - men blühn - ich weiß - nicht - mehr - was war es doch?

This lingering presence of the adult’s dreaming perspective haunts Schumann’s set of piano pieces *Kinderszenen*, Op. 15, even as it deliberately evokes memories of an innocent past. Each piece is ostensibly a simple portrait of a particular aspect of childhood. The rhythmic energy and syncopations of *Knight of the Hobby-horse* and *Catch-me-if-you-can* playfully depict the physical movements of children’s games, while the delicate figurations of movements such as *Child Falling Asleep* anticipate the peaceful dream-world of Humperdinck’s *Hänsel und Gretel*. However, the work as a whole is suffused with an additional quality of fantasy which suggests the composer’s isolation from this world. The first piece in the set, *Of*

*Foreign Lands and Peoples*, epitomises childlike innocence. In a simple binary form, it essentially remains in the tonic throughout, and the melody is balanced and repetitive, based on a singing, arc-shaped fragment (Fig. 7). Beneath the surface, however, Schumann's accompaniment, like that of Brahms, draws us into the "deepened level of consciousness" described by Hirsch. Marked *piano*, pedalled arpeggiated quaver triplets throughout blur the duple meter and offset the dotted rhythms of the melody, while a gentle chromatic inner line meanders dream-like throughout the opening phrase, all of which creates the impression of interiority. Floating above this accompaniment, the melody becomes at once familiar and distant, a simple moment in the past blurred with the adult fantasy of a distant childhood. The elusive nature of this fantasy comes to the fore in *Child Falling Asleep*. Like *Of Foreign Lands and People*, it is tranquil and delicate, but semitone neighbour note figures in E minor superimpose a wistful adult perspective. The last eight bars directly echo the opening, but the tonic of the final cadence is replaced with the subdominant, a sustained A minor chord which fades with the pedal and dynamic (Fig 8). In light of the adult perspective which pervades the rest of the work, this lack of closure, suggestive of the child disappearing into the world of sleep, equally evokes the fragility of the adult's fantasy of childhood as it disappears into a world beyond the pages of the music. In their search to restore an individual's past through music, Romantic composers thus encountered the paradox of adult and child, present and past perception, their evocations of childhood instead resulting in a twilight world of memory and dreams.

**Figure 7** Robert Schumann, *Of Foreign Lands and People*, from *Kinderszenen*, Op. 15, bb. 1–8.

M.M. ♩ = 108

*p* 3 3

*Ped.*

The musical score for Figure 7 is in 2/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It consists of two systems of piano accompaniment. The first system (bb. 1–8) features a treble clef with a melody of eighth notes and quarter notes, and a bass clef with a steady eighth-note accompaniment. The second system (bb. 9–16) continues the melody and accompaniment. The piece is marked *p* (piano) and includes a *Ped.* (pedal) marking.

**Figure 8** Robert Schumann, *Child Falling Asleep*, from *Kinderszenen*, Op. 15, bb. 25–32.

*p*

ri - tar - dan - do

*Ped.*

The musical score for Figure 8 is in 2/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It consists of two systems of piano accompaniment. The first system (bb. 25–30) features a treble clef with a melody of eighth notes and quarter notes, and a bass clef with a steady eighth-note accompaniment. The second system (bb. 31–32) continues the melody and accompaniment. The piece is marked *p* (piano) and includes a *Ped.* (pedal) marking. The lyrics "ri - tar - dan - do" are written under the melody in the second system.

## Musical experience, fairytale and the revival of the childhood imagination

For some Romantics, a very different perspective on childhood could be accessed through fairytale, with childlike innocence perceived as a universal, fantastic quality which can exist in the adult present rather

than a self-contained world confined to the past. With plots derived from folklore and fairytale, nineteenth-century German opera freely wove together human and supernatural characters and situations,<sup>28</sup> and Hoffmann's *Undine*, composed in 1813 and based on a novella by Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué, uses the genre to explore the interaction of children's fantasy with an adult world. Undine, the water-spirit, though eighteen years old, embodies the innocent child: the presence of her foster-parents throughout the opera and the constant references to her as "child" by other characters establish this characterisation. Like the child in Wordsworth's poem *Ode: Intimations of Immortality* who is born "trailing clouds of glory,"<sup>29</sup> Undine's origins are mysterious and divine. In Scene 1, as her foster-father describes Undine's mysterious arrival as a baby and the "crystal vaults" and "golden trees" of her former home, a *pianissimo* woodwind chordal theme suggests her otherworldly origins (Fig. 9), a marked contrast to the lilting string accompaniment of the preceding romanza. However, Undine is more than the child of Humperdinck's *Märchenoper* or Wordsworth's poetry. As a water-sprite and thus an explicitly supernatural being, her childhood is eternal; she is able to retain her innocence even as she engages with the adult world of the opera. Her duets with others, even with Huldebrand's rejected lover Berthalda, are dominated by balanced, clearly phrased and folk-like melodies which highlight the childlike naivety which pervades her adult relationships (Fig. 10). As she disappears from the earth, having been betrayed by the human knight she marries, her aria remains both almost entirely diatonic and largely in the major key. Her unembellished melody is accompanied by tranquil, uniform semiquavers which persist even as she fades into the depths, reflecting the unchanged innocence of her character (Fig. 11). Recalling the supernatural origins of this childlike simplicity, a reminiscence of the same woodwind theme which was earlier associated with her otherworldly home both precedes and is echoed during her aria. As the embodiment of childhood projected onto a fantastic figure, Undine thus transcends time and the individual,

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<sup>28</sup> J. Peter Burkholder, Donald J. Grout, and Claude V. Palisca, *A History of Western Music*, 8th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 678.

<sup>29</sup> Wordsworth, 113, line 64.

representing an innocence which prevails in an adult world even in the face of death and betrayal.

**Figure 9** E. T. A. Hoffmann, *Undine*, from Act I Scene 2: “Crystal vaults, golden trees and green walls, clear as glass.”

Più mosso

Fischer:

Kry-stall-ge - wol-be, gold-ne Bäu-me und grü-ne Wän - de, klar — wie

Hrzb. *pp* *Str.* *pp*

**Figure 10** E. T. A. Hoffmann, *Undine*, from Act II Scene 1: “Rustle, green trees, celebrating throughout the night!”

Andantino

Berthalda:

Rauscht, ihr grü-nen — Bäu - me, fei - ernd durch die — Nacht!

Undine:

Rauscht, ihr grü-nen — Bäu - me, fei - ernd durch die — Nacht!

*Bl.* *(p)* *Vlc.* *Str.* *(+Bl.)*  
*Hr.* *Kb.*

**Figure 11** E. T. A. Hoffmann, *Undine*, from Act II Finale: “Alas, what have you done?”

The musical score consists of two systems. The first system shows the vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in a soprano clef with a key signature of two flats and a 3/4 time signature. The lyrics are "rich - tet, oh weh, was hast du an - ge -". The piano accompaniment is in a grand staff with a key signature of two flats and a 3/4 time signature. It features a piano part with a dynamic marking of *pp* and a performance instruction *VI. sempre legato e piano*. The second system shows the vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line has the lyrics "rich - tet!". The piano accompaniment continues with a dynamic marking of *pp*.

The portrayal of childhood as a transcendent quality rather than an impermanent, personal memory can partly be accounted for by the conventions of folkloric German opera favouring supernatural, universal plots, but it also reflects the Romantic notion of the childlike imagination as an important agent of adult perception and experience. Author Oscar Wilde, among others, stressed the universality of children’s fantasy by specifying that his fairytales were written “partly for children, and partly for those who have kept the child-like qualities of wonder and joy.”<sup>30</sup> Although in Hoffmann’s opera *Undine*’s disappearance into the deep suggests that innocence is still fragile in a mortal world, indirectly it also confirms Wilde’s attitude: the audience’s experience of the opera itself demands a childlike suspension of disbelief in order to enter the numinous world of the fairytale depicted onstage. Hoffmann explores in more depth

<sup>30</sup> Sandner, 4.

this link between the child's imaginative experience of the fairytale and the adult appreciation of music in *Kreisleriana*. As the narrator grows older, though struggling with his lack of musical inspiration, he laughs at his "childish absurdity in trying to *see* melodies in [the] covering of moss."<sup>31</sup> However, music and fairytale for Hoffmann stem from the same numinous realm, their power arising from their ability to conjure intangible worlds accessible only to the childlike imagination. Thus the speaker later realises his mistake: his adult rationality set aside, leaning against the same moss-covered rock he "often heard a sound like that of gentle spirit-voices, the melodies . . . came to life afresh."<sup>32</sup> In an innocent reverie which unlocks the fairytale world which entranced him in childhood, musical inspiration too is restored. For Hoffmann and others, the childlike imagination could be revived in adulthood, its ability to envisage and innocently accept fantastic, spiritual worlds offering the key to a higher experience of music.

## Conclusion

Romantic composers were not only concerned with portraying childhood in isolation: their works evince the Romantic struggle to reconcile the elusive ideal of the child's divine imagination with a fallen adult world in music. The innocent, idyllic realm of Humperdinck's *Hänsel und Gretel* is fragile, shattered and transformed into a nightmarish fantasy in Schubert's *Erkönig* by the intrusion of death and evil, suggesting the incompatibility of child and adult worlds. From the adult perspective, the attempt to recover the memory of the past through music results in an equally fragmented and conflicting fantasy of childhood. For Hoffmann, however, opposing worlds can be reconciled, but only by exchanging adult rationality for the simple, innocent perspective of the child. It is ultimately in the childlike experience of fairytale, that elevated realm

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<sup>31</sup> Hoffmann, "Kreisleriana," 163.

<sup>32</sup> Hoffmann, "Kreisleriana," 163.

in which the past and present, natural and supernatural are freely entwined, that the glory of childhood and of musical experience itself can be restored.

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## Illustration

"She came upon a low curtain..." from *Alice in Wonderland*. Wood Engraving. [http://www.johntenniel.com/view\\_art.php?art\\_id=1359&min=0&max=1000000&portrait=&original=&sub=&sort\\_by=alice&sold=](http://www.johntenniel.com/view_art.php?art_id=1359&min=0&max=1000000&portrait=&original=&sub=&sort_by=alice&sold=)

## ABSTRACT

The nineteenth century witnessed an upheaval in the perception of the childhood imagination, elevated as a source of innocence and enlightenment by poets and authors in an era of political disillusionment. By synthesising historical and musical analysis of works both explicitly centred on and more subtly linked to childhood, this article explores the less well-documented influence of contemporary conceptions of childhood on Romantic music. From the wonderment of Humperdinck's *Märchenoper* to the fragmented fantasy of Schumann's *Kinderszenen*, the terror of Schubert's *Erlkönig* to the transcendence of Hoffmann's *Undine*, childhood appears in many guises, but an overriding picture emerges of the Romantic yearning for a fantastic, idealised innocence accessed through the child's imagination, and the unique power of music to recreate and engage with this ideal.

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Nicole Nahm is a second-year student undertaking the combined Music Studies-Medicine program at the University of Sydney. She is currently studying piano at the Conservatorium with Clemens Leske, but maintains a keen interest in music history. Her article *Dreams of Childhood* was initially written for the subject *Romanticism and the Fantastic*, taught by Dr. David Larkin at the Conservatorium.