

The Eternal Merging of Conscious States:

An In-Depth Music Analysis of Schubert's *Nachthymne*

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Novalis' series of poems and prose Hymns to the night address what might be the most curious human phenomenon, sleep. We spend a third of our lives unconscious, engulfed in fantastical places, fabricated narratives, and worlds that are only constrained by the limits of our imagination. It is, perhaps, the closest we will ever come to dying while alive. At the same time, sleeping is when we are in the freest state, visiting the contents of our mind. Human rest is a pile of contradictions, and Novalis plays with contradictions all through his poem; night and day, cold and hot, life and death, light and shadow, we can point to several binaries; a constant reminder of opposites, which seems to be suggestive of human mortality and immortality. He intertwines and romanticizes the concepts of life, death and sleep, and the day he will finally reunite with the beloved, whose identity remains ambiguous in the poem. Schubert's interpretation of "Nachthymne," D. 687 (1820) is a narrative, the musical textures guiding the listener through the poem patiently, taking each strophe slowly, repeating every line at least once. Schubert's setting explores the relationships between conscious and temporal states of mind through his use of musical textures and melodic material. All the while, creating songful earworms that powerfully draw in the listener to be immersed in this musical world.

The song begins with a delicate hymn, almost like a sweet lullaby that would be sung to a child as they fall asleep. It is in a major key, something we would not expect from words that allude to an approaching death. In the third strophe, the tone suddenly changes with the idea of power and eternal life. The accompaniment bursts with lively energy, and the minor key is a stark contrast from the first and last sections of the piece. The rich harmonies are suggestive of a heavenly realm. At the end of the section, the voice fades away, and the A major moving to E

diminished is an eerie indication that we have entered the dream state. From here until the end of the piece, the nuclear figure becomes the concept of rejuvenation. The accompaniment moves to a state of fresh energy, this time devoid of the anxiety felt in the dense chords we heard before. The rhythm is quick and airy, and the harmonies lure the listener into this heavenly state.

The poem moves from the future tense to the future present tense, to the present, and back the continuous present tense. The lack of linear movement of time is crucial in understanding the meaning of the poem, and Schubert's decision to move us back to the penultimate strophe to end the piece is significant in his interpretation of the meaning and consequence of death. Where the last strophe celebrates the cycle of night and day, of life and death, the previous strophe praises death above all forms of life, suggesting that it is more uplifting than life itself.

Between 1797 and 1800, Romantic German poet and philosopher by the pen name of Novalis, wrote a series of six prose poems titled "hymns to the night." The collection explores the interaction between night and day and death and life and reveals the relationships between them. Novalis views death as a kind of eternal communion and reunion with our natural state as heavenly beings. Ulrich Eisenlohr mentions Novalis' take on death in *The Deutsche Schubert-Lied-Edition* (Settings of Poems by Romantic Poets, Vol. 3):

The aim of Novalis's view of death becomes perfectly clear: it was intended to be a bridge to eternal love, union and joy. A mixture of ecstatic mysticism and Christian spirituality becomes particularly clear at this point, but it also contains elements of intellectual and carnal love associated with Eros and "*Thanatos*."

Novalis himself paints a picture of this heavenly realm:

Man rises up towards the heavens as if of himself when nothing more binds him, the higher organs step forth of themselves from the general uniform mixture and from the complete dissolution of all human propensities and powers, to appear for the first time as the original seed of mortal shape. The spirit of God moves across the waters and across the ebbing waves as a heavenly island can be seen for the first time as the dwelling place of the new man, as the river zone for eternal life. (Novalis, *Christendom or Europe*).

Some have proposed that the hymns are emblematic of Christ as a necessary active agent between man and his ascension into heaven; “beloved, draw me powerfully in.” Other scholars are insistent that the beloved is Sophie. However, the poem makes no indication of who or what the beloved is, and it’s conceivable that it is an abstract concept rather than a recognizable entity. Thus, the way I will interpret this poem is with an assumption of some form of pantheist perspective, though this in itself does not eliminate the possibility of a Christian interpretation, due to the undercurrents of an expected paradise after life.

The translation I am using is by Richard Wigmore and the separated strophes were my own addition in aid of better understanding the meaning of the text by breaking it into segments of four lines, each strophe ending in a period. Schubert appears to make the same divisions in the song. Within the poem, I will argue that there are distinct conscious states that are revealed by the tenses within the poem. The first two strophes begin in first person future tense: “I shall pass over... I shall be freed.” The speaker is dreaming of “passing over,” what we assume is death, and becoming absorbed into some kind of heavenly realm. The middle three strophes are second person future tense, the speaker is speaking to the beloved - whatever or whoever that might be - and is further narrating the events that are to take place in this heavenly realm. By strophe five, the speaker appears to be so engrossed in his vision that he is speaking in the present tense.

“Beloved, draw me powerfully in,” *right now*, as opposed to “The beloved *will* draw me powerfully in,” at some future date. This indicates that there is already a shift occurring, the speaker is experiencing the present as he speaks about the future, suggesting a fading of consciousness as we understand it; he loses the sense of the present altogether. By the penultimate strophe, the speaker is firmly embedded in the present, and is no longer speaking in hypotheticals. He describes the feeling of change from something physical - the blood of the mortal human body - to something spiritual, balm and ether. The last strophe is where the epiphany lies, the speaker realizes that every night is like a death. It is possible that this is just an allegory to sleeping and waking states, but also quite plausible that the author is suggesting a death of consciousness and an attempt at reaching a conscious state that is superior to our own mortal comprehension.

Additionally, the rhythm of the poem itself seems to provide insights into its meaning. The lines alternate between four and five syllables, and there is a clear beat. While I am not an expert on rhythm and poetry, I believe it is reasonable to argue that rhythm affects human perception and consciousness. Bodies are in rhythm with breath and the constant beating of the heart. Rhythm is powerful because of its physicality, which perhaps, more effectively penetrates the body than something metaphysical can affect the mind. Rhythm is the foundation of poetry probably because of its ability to draw one into a world outside of their own through the different pulses, which is exactly what happens in *Nachthymne*. The rhyme and repetition are also necessary because they repeat concepts that are important to keep at the forefront of the mind when grasping the meaning of the poem. Similarly, the patterned repetition is a harmony of expectation and surprise that results in revelation. The same idea applies to music. Thus, in this

paper I will argue that we can understand the three megastrophes as states of consciousness, and the harmonic and rhythmic elements provide further insight into this hypothesis.

Forms of Consciousness

Within the poem, we notice four states of consciousness. I will briefly describe each here before moving to the music.

1. The first conscious state is what I will call the Living (ms. 1-26). I will refer to this state as regular human action, engaged in behaviors that are necessary to nurture the body and continue self-preservation. Because of the body's natural disposition is to keep itself alive, it comes to no surprise that this state is the most egotistical and concerned with its own individuality. This passage is lied form, and is self-sufficient, so it could survive independent of the proceeding music.

2. The second conscious state in the poem is what I will term the "dying" state (ms. 27-60) as the entire section seems to be conducive to a continuous act of dying in the figurative sense. This section in the music demonstrates the evolution of slowly losing consciousness. However, the loss of conscious implies that there was previously consciousness there. Additionally, the music is dependent on the lied that came before, as it could not begin or end independent of the other two megastrophes.

3. The third state is the actual process of falling asleep (ms. 49-60) and losing one's identity to something beyond conscious control. This is a short section within Nachthymne, however it is a significant demarcation of the halfway point of the piece and produces the large-scale half cadence. The big half cadence follows three measures of altering I and ii°. This seems to act as having the effect of a whole tone scale, representative of entering a different realm. These measures seal the deal that we are in a different state. However, because of its

brevity, I will group the sleeping state in with the dying state. Conceptually, this makes sense. Sleeping represents the final phase out of consciousness necessary for the spirit to completely leave the body behind and progress to a new state. Though I consider sleeping and the dying state to be distinct, they both involve the act of losing consciousness, and are thus interdependent. Sleeping, as a metaphor for fully losing yourself, demands an initial state of preparedness and acceptance, in the same way a person must be open to hypnosis if it is to work on them. Similarly, the final stage of losing oneself requires the sleeping state to complete its phase. In the passage below, you can see the outline of an almost whole tone scale, conducive to entering the dream/sleep state.



4. Finally, the fourth state is rejuvenation (ms. 61-108). We are no longer awake, yet maybe not quite asleep. Rather, we are in an alternate state of consciousness, one that is perhaps, in harmony with humanity and nature. Whether we are asleep or dead, this state produces an alternate form of consciousness, and it is this change in consciousness that we are concerned with, rather than the state that caused the shift.

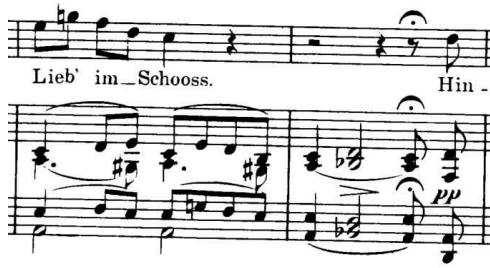
Schubert's setting of the text can be broken down into three mega strophes: 1. The Living, 2. The Dying, and 3. Rejuvenation. I use the continuous tense here because each of these states are in a process of change, rather than a discrete transformation. These three strophes are pivotal for the breakdown of the narrative, helping us understand each segment in relation to one of these conscious states, although they are often more blurred and nuanced than simply cutting the music into sections. For instance, the dying state moves into a state of disequilibrium and

through the sleeping state before reaching megastrophe three, rejuvenation. These intermediary passages are luminous spaces that serve to close and prepare the three megastrophes. The song aids in the interpretation of the poem by its structure and the order (and disorder) of events that outline the action of the text, through these three musical events, almost like mini movements.

The Living

At the beginning of the poem, we hear the credence of a living being before death. The introduction to *Nachthymne* begins gently in *pianissimo*. With the title of Hymn to the Night, we expect a hymn-like lied, and our expectations are met. The chords in the introduction are certainly similar to those you would hear in a hymn. In ms. 9 at the beginning of ¶2b, we get an extra measure of piano accompaniment requiring a *transposore*. This moment sets us off course slightly from the regular beat pattern, and the melody is varied and already we begin questioning the form of the lied. But we are back on track in ms. 11 when the same melody from ¶1a comes back and we have a full cadence on I.

The first two strophes are in future tense, “I shall pass over... “[it] will be...” “I shall be freed...” From these eight lines, the future tense suggests that the speaker is very much still alive, enduring the pains and prisons that present themselves in a normal human life. The speaker anticipates death, but it is clear that they are very much alive. In ms. 14, we begin ¶2a in B, moving from B major to B minor in ms. 15 and 16. In ms. 17, the left-hand texture changes from block chords to a sweep of eighth notes supporting the voice. Additionally, this is the only moment in the entire song where a single line is repeated rather than two lines. This carries us to the odd half cadence where the V moves to its upper neighbor VI and back down.



This becomes a foreshadowing moment for ms. 58, when the consciousness is utterly subdued by similar harmonic motion. Finally, the ¶2 ends with a verbatim refrain of the beginning of the song, ms. 5-9. This megastrophe I titled, “the living,” ends here.

¶1 is metrically predictable with four 4 beat patterns. The state produces something like a mundane tranquility, acceptance of the human life just as it is, with all its joys and sorrows, and its eventual end. ¶2 sets us slightly off course, as there are two metrical expansions to accommodate the extra measures of music. In ¶1a, this extra music is at ms. 18 and 19. It is as though the thought of being in “the bosom of love” is so alluring, that the speaker loses himself in thought here and stops singing. The piano accompaniment is forced to slow down and take a breath. The second metrical expansion occurs at the end of the megastrophe at ms. 24 and 25, the two measures of postlude. Ms. 1-25 could easily stand alone as its own lied without the proceeding material. This is interesting, because in most music we are used to hearing the music come back again and again in various forms and iterations, but it seems that there is nothing from ms. 1-25 that is recognizable in the rest of the piece. Perhaps, then, because the words of the poem here speak in the present tense, and if we take that to mean we are in the realm of the living, then there is no reason that any music from this strophe should make another appearance because it represents the living, and the physical and metaphysical material is bound to be different between spiritual and physical life.

It is reasonable then, that the beginning is a lied, for lieder are orderly and repetitive. As humans confined to a temporal understanding, there is a strong need for repetition and predictability, and that is exactly what we get in this first mega strophe. Additionally, the first strophe of the poem is repeated in the megastrophe three times, further emphasizing the repetitive nature of the beginning, though this fact certainly does not make this music any less beautiful.

The Dying

In the next two strophes, we dive deeper into the imagination, or perhaps, better described as, the descent into madness. It seems that the poet is so immersed in his vision that the line between imagination and reality becomes increasingly blurred. Perhaps it *is* just a vision, but if one's idea of the unreal creates emotions that *are* real, our mental state seems to matter less than the feeling we are feeling. To achieve this otherworldly state, we notice some distinctive changes, and we enter the most harmonically interesting passage of the song. On "Unendliches leben," that is, Eternal life, will surge powerfully within me, the music drastically changes texture. We hear the pulsating B minor chord, the repetition drawing us in to this new world at the start of ¶3a. The rhythm is the most essential feature of the passage, without the constant pulsation, there would be no feeling of being drawn into the heavens, and the throbbing is so overwhelming that it seems we must give up ourselves into something much more powerful. The F# in the inner voice is repeated a total of 40 times before finally moving to E in ms. 28. At the same time, the voice is remaining secure on the D, barely moving except for octave drop at the end of the phrase. The voice repeats the same phrase again, but a whole step down in ms. 32. As if this passage could not get any more tense, the left hand moves from pulsating chords to tremolando, further imposing the instability of the passage. The bass passes through A to G# (VI

of B minor) where it sustains as the right hand passes through E and D#, bringing the passage to its sequential repetition a whole step down in A minor. The process repeats itself once more. A in the bass passes through G to F (V of Bb major) the right hand passes through B-Bb-A. The passage arrives at F major, V of Bb major, where it finally cadences at ms. 32. We might consider Bb as its enharmonic of A# here, as A# is the leading tone to B, where we are desperately striving to arrive. The accompaniment firmly establishes the key of A# major, and the voice again sequences down a whole step. However, this time instead of repeating the same note, it outlines the A# major triad. The phrase ends on E, the leading tone to F. Instead of arriving at F and creating a V-I motion back to Bb, the bass moves to F# instead, creating the most electrifying charge of the entire piece. The F# is unexpected and draws your ear to the intense dissonance that is finally cleared by the right-hand accompaniment moving up a half step. Suddenly we're committed to B major rather than moving to a stable Bb major. The voice tries its melody once more, and finally we arrive at B major at the down beat of ms. 36 after two measures of V preparation, and five measures in A#, the leading tone to B.

Interestingly, this music corresponds to the words, "I will gaze down on you from above," which we can easily hear the music responding to the meaning of the text when the F# in the bass plays the most energized note in the whole piece. The D diminished chord with F# in the bass is the most otherworldly sound in the piece, perhaps the speaker's body has risen with the thundering bass. We get two measures of B major, perhaps getting used to the idea of disappearing consciousness, something that demonstrates a state of disequilibrium - it is almost stable, but not quite. At ms. 40, the harmony begins descending chromatically, the music must unravel itself from all of the harmonic richness and tension that proceeded. The vocal line also descends using the same rhythm as before, but sequences down in half steps rather than whole,

the harmonic changes are quicker, suggesting both an unraveling and a fading away. The chromaticism ends at B as we approach an E minor cadence, however despite the cadential motion from V-I in the bass, we never get a cadence because the right-hand accompaniment is oscillating between the D# and E, and the E changes from a I to a V, and the following three measures alternate between II6 and V, producing the half cadence on E in A major in ms. 47, and a measure of cadential extension in ms. 48.

Rejuvenation

This state implies a conjoining of death and life. Unifying the two and becoming at one with the consciousness. Graham Johnson comments on the quality of music as something that is heavenly, with the consistency of a liquid:

This music is some of the most ethereal and rarefied that Schubert ever wrote; the words talk of flowing blood, of balsam and ether, of implied sexual communion, and the music's consistency is liquid enough to encompass all these images. This is music for an altered state.

I would go further to mention that the texture is light and lively, resembling a body that has turned to ether. While we couldn't say that music is mimetic of this experience because we have not experienced this phenomenon, I would argue that triplet eighth-note figure is the closest we could come to such a feeling. The right-hand accompaniment moves quickly and shifts between octaves, which gives this an effect of being weightless. If the accompaniment had repeated notes or chords in the same register it wouldn't feel like we are floating, but we would feel anchored down. This is a contrast from the chords of the beginning hymn. The entire section alters between I and V grounding us firmly in D major. Additionally, this is the most metrically regular portion of the piece, tying us back to the simplicity in the "living" megastrophe.

The voice line melody is embedded within the accompaniment, the top note of the piano is always in synch with the voice. The character of this music could not be more triumphant in nature. The melodic material oscillates between major 3rds, and the steady quarter notes give it a march-like feel. The entire megastrophe seems to evoke a feeling of confident determinedness about the idea of death as the most glorious thing one could ever experience.

Wigmore translates “Gluth” to “fire,” however, the word could also be translated to “glow.” George MacDonald translates this as “holy rapture.” This translation seems to be better suited for the character of the poem, which is full of vivid imagery and perhaps tied to the concept of radiance that we get in strophe four. “The bosom of love” is also likely tied to this euphoria that is being conveyed throughout the poem. Thus, I think we can understand the ambiance of this eternal bliss as a radiant, glowing, holy rapture. In *Christendom or Europe* Novalis expands on his idea of paradise as a “universal individuality.” This is further support for the idea that one turns into a single, universal consciousness at death and this consciousness is in harmony with all of nature.

The music perfectly enhances this rapturous experience. The music moves through another rule of the octave beginning from A in ms. 68 moving all the way through the octave until ms. 79 when we get to V and full cadence on the downbeat of ms. 80. The music is effervescent, and you can better feel all of the colors that words attempted to describe. As the music moves up the octave, each harmonic change seems to add a new spark of color to the atmosphere. The lushness and energy that is captured within this passage could not end at ms. 80 with a full cadence, as this energy needs somewhere to go. Additionally, we have not heard the final strophe of the poem yet. At ms. 81, we get verbatim repetition of the music from ms. 64-80. This time, the text begins with the last line of the poem, rather than the penultimate strophe. It

makes sense to simply repeat the music again here, as the accompaniment is harmonically rich, and paired with a simple melodic line and a fast rhythmic pulse, the music is the source of the rejuvenating energy. We move up the rule of the octave again, but this time we go all the way up to the D in ms. 101. The D in the left-hand is held as a pedal point while the right-hand syncopates a G major triad, delaying the full cadence on I while the voice finishes the last line, “I feel, I feel the rejuvenating tide of death.” The full cadence finally occurs on the downbeat of ms. 104. There are four measures of cadential extension, sequencing up to the high D, in effort to bleed out the rest of the energy. Perhaps it is not until this point that the last of the blood is converted to ether.

Revelation

There is much more music than there is prose, and interestingly, the last lines are not the last lines of the poem. Schubert closes the poem with the line: “I feel the rejuvenating tide of death,” which suggests an alternate interpretation of the poem than the revelation described above, that every day is like a life, and every night is a death. The poem ends with “I die in the sacred fire,” suggesting an end of consciousness in the land of the living, and an elevation into a higher conscious state, however, “rejuvenating tide of death” is perhaps, a more positive outlook. This may not be a complete surrender of consciousness or identity in the way dying in a sacred fire is. Instead, dying is actually life-giving.

The entire poem could be constructed in a different order, demonstrating that the poem is not dependent on time, and its meaning does not change despite its rearrangement of substrophes. Novalis begins with life and ends with death because as humans, we are subject to temporal constrictions, so this is typically the way we must understand the progression of time and therefore, narrative.

After this analysis, we have determined that the piece is divided into three mega strophes, each functioning as the three stages in a narrative. Life can stand alone, and death represents a slowly declining conscious state, but the music cannot stand on its own like mega strophe one. Megastrophe three is clearly a result of strophe two, and it seems to be an amalgamation of a conscious state that becomes one with all other conscious states and living beings. However, this does not seem to say much about the meaning of the poem - if it means anything at all. But I propose that the interpretation of the song supports a meaning that plays with the idea of cycles; night and day, sleep and awake, death and life. The narrative supports all three cycles.

Megastrophe one could be understood as the daylight, or perhaps, sunset. Megastrophe two transports us to the activity present deep in the night, REM sleep, perhaps. Finally, megastrophe three reminds us that the sun always comes up in the morning, and we feel refreshed and rejuvenated, ready to begin the cycle of life again. Each day is like life, and each night is like death. I think it is plausible that the entire piece could be played again from beginning to end without it feeling the least bit repetitive. The song ends on a gentle D major chord, just how it began. In most forms of narrative, once the plot is grasped, and the counteraction produces the revelation, there is no more we can go with the story. However, if we understand this poem and song in terms of a cycle that perpetually persists, then we can listen to it forever, and perhaps gain a deeper understanding with each listen. There is not a single moment of epiphany, but countless moments that continue to reveal themselves with each listen. After all, what is life but a perpetual repetition of day and life cycles? Death is nothing but a change in consciousness, whether that be a termination of consciousness altogether, or a transformation into a different conscious state. Thus, in the grand scheme of things, if there is consciousness in other forms, a human life is simply a brief conversion into consciousness as we understand it into something

different than what it was before, and what it will eventually become. In essence, life is only a small part of the cycle of conscious states. Therefore, if we take the diurnal and nocturnal cycles to be allegorical for death and life, and if the song and the poem is within itself a cycle and a series of continuous cycles (living, dying, and rejuvenation) then perhaps there is no meaning in the poem or song at all, or more accurately, one creates their own meaning as they gain deeper understanding through repeating the cycles, just in the same way we tend to create meaning in life.

Nachthymne

Hinüber wall' ich,
Und jede Pein
Wird einst ein Stachel
Der Wollust sein.

Noch wenig Zeiten,
So bin ich los
Und liege trunken
Der Lieb' im Schoss.

Unendliches Leben
Wogt mächtig in mir,
Ich schaue von oben
Herunter nach dir.

An jenem Hügel
Verlischt dein Glanz –
Ein Schatten bringet
Den kühlenden Kranz.

O! sauge, Geliebter,
Gewaltig mich an,
Dass ich entschlummern
Und lieben kann.

Ich fühle des Todes
Verjüngende Flut,
Zu Balsam und Äther
Verwandelt mein Blut –

Ich lebe bei Tage
Voll Glauben und Mut,
Und sterbe die Nächte
In heiliger Glut.

Hymn to the Night

I shall pass over,
and all pain
will be a stab
of pleasure.

In a short while
I shall be freed
and lie enraptured
in the bosom of love.

Eternal life
will surge powerfully within me;
I shall gaze down on you
from above.

Your radiance will fade
on yonder hill,
shadow will bring
a cooling wreath.

Beloved, draw me
powerfully in,
that I may fall asleep
and love.

I feel the rejuvenating
tide of death,
my blood is changed
to balm and ether.

By day I live
Full of faith and courage
At night I die
In the sacred fire.

Line Repetition in Nachthymne D. 681

I shall pass over,
And all pain
Will be a stab
Of pleasure.

I shall pass over,
And all pain
Will be a stab
Of pleasure

In a short while
I will be freed
And lie enraptured
In the bosom of love.

In the bosom of love.

I shall pass over
And all pain
Will be a stab
Of pleasure

Eternal life
Will surge powerfully within me

Eternal life
Will surge powerfully within me

I shall gaze down on you
From above

I shall gaze down on you
From above

Your radiance will fade
On yonder hill

Your radiance will fade
On yonder hill

Shadow will bring
A cooling wreath

Beloved, draw me
Powerfully in
That I may fall asleep
And love

Beloved, draw me
Powerfully in
That I may fall asleep (and love)

Your radiance will fade
On yonder hill

Shadow will bring
A cooling wreath

Beloved, draw me
Powerfully in
That I may fall asleep
And love

Beloved, draw me
Powerfully in
That I may fall asleep (and love)

I feel the rejuvenating
Tide of death,
My blood is changed
To balm and either

My blood is changed
To balm and ether

I feel the rejuvenating
Tide of death

By day I live
Full of faith and courage,
At night I die
In the sacred fire.

At night I die
In the sacred fire

I feel the rejuvenating
Tide of death

I feel,
I feel the rejuvenating
Tide of death.

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