Blue Eyes, Lacanian Real
A psychoanalytic reading of Gustav Mahler’s Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen

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Abstract

Gustav Mahler’s *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* (first published 1887) feature as their only character a miserable wayfarer who laments his unrequited love for someone and who, in spite of all his beautiful pastoral surroundings, cannot help but feel deep unhappiness. Using Lacan’s three orders (Imaginary, Symbolic and Real) and further developments of his theory by Slavoj Žižek in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, I argue that the eyes of the wayfarer’s beloved are the Lacanian Real that disrupts his symbolic network and thus are the origin of his traumatic existence. His misery becomes an immanent part of his identity and he can therefore only exist through this feeling. Furthermore I suggest that, although he laments the situation, he subconsciously desires the unhappy love affair as a way of guaranteeing his own existence as a wayfarer, in accordance with Freud’s concept of Repetition compulsion.

**Keywords:** Gustav Mahler, *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*, Psychoanalysis, Lacan, Žižek, three Orders, Repetition compulsion.
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1. Introduction

Gustav Mahler’s lied cycle *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* (Songs of a Wayfarer) was composed between 1883 and 1885 and is often considered his first mature work.¹ The work features as sole human character a wayfarer who laments his misery that arises from unrequited love, and engages in imaginary dialogue with birds and flowers in his surroundings. Now euphoric, now despairing, the wayfarer is a tragic character that goes on with his wanderings without receiving any recognition from anyone.

With the exception of the first lied of the cycle—which was adapted from the collection of German songs *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*—the entire text was written by Mahler himself.² The music illustrates both the surroundings and the character’s moods in accordance with the romantic tradition of Schubert, Schumann and others. Both the orchestration and the text were thoroughly revised by the composer on several occasions after its first publication in 1887 and therefore constitute a reliable source for Mahler’s musical and poetic language. In other words, the *Gesellen* cycle engages in all the irony and complexity that characterize his later works.³

1.1. Aims, material and questions

The aim of this study is to explore the interpretative possibilities of a hermeneutical-psychoanalytical approach to the analysis of Gustav Mahler’s song cycle *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*. Such a reading of the work has to my knowledge not yet been done. The primary material that serves as the basis of the study is the orchestral score in its 1982 critical edition, including the text of the songs as it appears in it.⁴ In doing a psychoanalytic close reading of the work, I aim to understand the relationship between text and music and how this reflects the wayfarer’s personal psychology, his desires and his identity both as an individual—i.e. as a “human being”—and as a character with a limited field of action. The individual questions I aim to answer are:

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² Roman, “From collection to cycle”, p. 3597 [79]. See below page 11 for further details on the adaption of the text from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* by Mahler.


1. How does the music illustrate the wayfarer’s sensory and mental reality?

2. How can the psychology of the wayfarer be understood through Lacan’s three orders, the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real and through Freud’s concept of Repetition compulsion?

1.2. Previous research

Given the importance of the Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen in the Mahlers’ output, every biography in the plethora of Mahler literature includes at least a few pages on the work. The focus, however, is usually set on either the biographical circumstances of the composition, or on the controversial chronology of the different manuscripts, a subject that Zoltan Roman and Donald Mitchell discuss in great detail (see below page 10). However, and maybe due to the small size of the song cycle as opposed to the colossal symphonies that would follow (just the first movement of the Third Symphony, for instance, is three times as long as the whole Gesellen cycle), it has not received as much serious interpretative attention as the larger works, even though Mahler’s own tonal language and the complex interpretative possibilities that surround it are all already there. Moreover, there is to my knowledge no analysis of Mahler’s work that uses the Lacanian or the Žižekian perspective.

1.3. Theoretical considerations and method: hermeneutical musical analysis and Lacanian psychoanalysis

My approach in this study is the hermeneutical musical analysis, also called “open interpretation” by musicologist Lawrence Kramer. As opposed to “conventional” interpretation, which presupposes that “a certain meaning is transparently present in both the expressive form of the thing interpreted and in the language of the interpreter”, hermeneutic interpretation creates meaning by analysis:

Interpretation in the hermeneutic sense—call it open interpretation—is very different [from ‘conventional’ interpretation]. Open interpretation aims not to reproduce its premises but to produce something from them. It depends on prior knowledge but expects that knowledge to be transformed in being used. Open interpretation concerns itself with phenomena in their singularity, not their generality. It treats the object of interpretation more as event than as structure and always

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as the performance of a human subject, not as a fixed form independent of concrete human agency.\(^6\)

It is through a reflective and articulate hermeneutic interpretation that subjectivity is created as such, as “intelligent agency in its concrete historical being”.\(^7\) On the whole, I have used open interpretation in an effort to understand the cultural object *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* as a “psychological landscape”. It is precisely through this process that I have aimed to create a subjective meaning that has intrinsic value to the interpreted work.

As to the psychoanalytic approach, I have applied Lacan’s three orders onto the musical and textual analysis of the *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*, either through analogy with similar points made by Slovenian psychoanalyst Slavoj Žižek in the context of film analysis, or through direct application of the *pure* concepts directly from their definition. The three orders, Imaginary, Symbolic and Real can hardly be defined in short here, not least because they lack a proper definition even from Lacan’s teaching and have been developed over the decades of his *Seminars*.\(^8\) However, as an orientational definition, it can be said that the Imaginary order consists of the field of images and thereby the “total”—i.e. “whole”, “complete”—conception of things. The Symbolic order represents the Law that circumscribes the Subject, including language as a regulating system. The paternal, phallic figure, for example, belongs to this order. Finally, the Real consists of the hard kernel that resists symbolization, much like the Kantian Sublime. It is in a way the origin of all subconscious libidinous activity that the Subject cannot put into words.

It is still somewhat controversial to apply Lacanian and Žižekian concepts in musicology. Most of the critique, however, has been pointed at the use of “pure” analysis of music *in se* and in connection with formal and harmonic models, e.g. Schenkerian analysis or even discredits music research as a field. See, for example, Reilly Smethurst’s comment that “[f]or most academics, listening to music is not as exciting as the encounters detailed in Schreber’s memoirs [*Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*]”,\(^9\) implying that music

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7 Ibid.


is devoid of the intricacies of an autobiography. Another misleading remark is that “[m]usic research referred to as Lacanian and/or post-Lacanian generally falls within opera studies or cinema studies”, again suggesting that music lacks a narrative anchor in itself and that musicology somehow becomes opera or cinema studies as soon as a narrative is exposed. Other criticism arises from resistance to the abstract character of formal and tonal analysis because of their purported non-relatedness to Lacanian considerations. This, however, is not the case in my study, since the focus is laid on the textual—i.e. narrative—qualities of both the text and the music (in the form of thematic material and details in the orchestration).

On the other hand, I do not see why a musical analysis should not profit from the use of such interpretative devices even if one would apply them to so-called absolute music. The main challenge of these kinds of studies is, I believe, the fact that most of Lacan’s teachings center around what I define as the “visual” field of ontology (cfr. the Gaze, the Imaginary order, the Mirror Stage, etc.). In other words, I argue that much of Lacan’s focus is laid upon the visual experience of the world, as opposed to the sense of hearing. Many of the concepts established by him therefore require much extrapolation and reinterpretation if they are to be applied to music. What would, for example, be the musical equivalent of the Gaze? or what about asking the essential question of Che vuoi? (the perverse desires of our unconscious reality) in the context of a harmonic progression? Many musicologists have demonstrated how feasible—if not necessary—the application of Lacanian and Žižekian concepts is: J. P. E. Harper-Scott, for instance, uses such interpretative tools most notably in relation the work of Edward Elgar and Benjamin Britten; fellow musicologist Kenneth Smith uses Lacanian concepts to understand tonality, especially in the output of Skryabin and other modern composers.  

On the whole, these critiques center around what I see as a failure to see the real implications of music as an existential experience as deeply imbedded in the logic of psychoanalysis as any other activity that mediates emotions. The use of psychoanalysis in musicology does not, in my opinion, differ greatly from its use in literary studies. The deconstruction of narrative and the quest for understanding either a character’s psychology or the psychological implications of a work as a whole is, in principle, the same in both fields. I believe that music is, on one hand, similar enough to other narrative arts to make psychoanalytic approaches straightforward, while at the same time unique enough to contribute to the development of the theory. Music can give expression to certain ideas (in the global sense of the term) that other media cannot, and that is the whole point of Lacanian/post-Lacanian musicology: the call for an adaptation for such an inquiry into the field of music and thus to render unto musicology the things that are psychoanalysis’ own and unto psychoanalysis the things that are musicology’s.
2. *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*

Mahler’s cycle *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*, which comprises four songs, was probably composed between 1883 and 1885 and first performed in 1886. According to Donald Mitchell there are four extant sources of the work, all of which show minor discrepancies. The four manuscripts, their evolution and interrelatedness serve as a window into Mahler’s creative process. With each new version, Mahler refined both the time- and the key-scheme of the different songs of the cycle and thus turned them more and more into a unified whole. There is some evidence that the cycle originally contained six songs, although this is a matter of definition. Mahler commented in 1885 that he had “written a cycle of songs, six of them so far”, but the fact that the German word “Lied” can mean either a song in the musical sense or a poem means that he could have written six poems and not six musical *lieder*. In either case, the two songs of the cycle remain unidentified, if not lost. One of them could possibly be a “Jugendgedicht” (Youth poem) published by Mahler in the Kassel-based periodical *Der Merker* in 1884. It is still also debated whether the cycle was originally composed for the piano or for the orchestra. What all scholars agree on—not least because of Mahler explicitly stating it—is that the songs were dedicated to the singer Johanna Emma Richter, with whom the composer had an unfortunate love affair during his time in Kassel, where he composed the cycle.

A crucial detail in understanding the genesis of the *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* is the question when Mahler got to know the collection of folkloric songs called *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, collected by Achim Arnim and Clemens Brentano and first published in 1805. This is relevant not least given the fact that the first song of the lied cycle actually comes from the anthology, suggesting that Mahler knew at least one of the *Wunderhorn* songs at the time. The most professed hypothesis is that Mahler got acquainted with the work at the household of Carl Maria von Weber’s grandson in the late 1880s. However, Mitchell strongly disagrees and gives evidence that Mahler got to know *Des

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13 Mitchell, *Gustav Mahler: The Wunderhorn Years*, pp. 89–112. For another discussion on the chronology of the cycle, see Roman, “From collection to cycle”.
17 Kennedy, *Mahler*, p. 23ff; de La Grange, *Mahler: Volume One*, p. 113, p. 120; Mitchell. *Gustav Mahler: The Wunderhorn Years*, p. 120.
**Knaben Wunderhorn** as early as 1875. Whenever Mahler got to know the book, the **Wunderhorn** strongly influenced him at the time of composing *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* and should thus be taken into consideration for understanding the work. As Michael Kennedy states, “the *Gesellen* cycle [is] Mahler’s pastiche of the Wunderhorn poems, proving how deeply embedded in his mind were the style and spirit of the anthology” and thus has a proper place next to the First, Second and Third Symphonies as the **Wunderhorn Symphonies**. This is further reinforced by the fact that Mahler later reused some of the themes of the *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* in his first symphony (premiered 1889). As to the reception of the cycle, it was generally cool and not uncritical, with remarks ranging from “unfortunate impression” to “the melodic line does not sing”. Other critics, however, were rather positive, stating that the *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* were no less admirable than the first symphony.

In all, the time of the composition of the cycle in Kassel was “a particularly stormy episode in [Mahler’s] life”, a period in which his talent as a composer was beginning to show through definitely and at the same time a phase already marked by a strenuous conducting agenda and constant giving and taking of responsibility and artistic freedom. Not only are the *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* a mature work in the musical sense of the word, but it seems, too, that Mahler’s identity had reached a mature state at this time, opening the table for some speculation about the autobiographic nature of the work.

In order to make the description and interpretation as readable as possible, I refer to the narrative events in their chronological order as much as possible, except when intertextuality requires a more contextual presentation. I have included the whole text of the cycle in the main body of the thesis in order for the reader to get acquainted with the story in its totality.

### 2.1. Wenn mein Schatz Hochzeit macht

The first lied of the cycle describes the feelings of the wayfarer at the mere thought of his beloved getting married with someone else:

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22 Ibid., p. 130.
Wenn mein Schatz Hochzeit macht,  
Fröhliche Hochzeit macht,  
Hab’ ich meinen traurigen Tag!  
Geh’ ich in mein Kämmerlein,  
Dunkles Kämmerlein,  
Weine, wein’ um meinen Schatz,  
Um meinen lieben Schatz!

When my love has her wedding-day,  
Her joyous wedding-day,  
I have my day of mourning!  
I go into my little room,  
My dark little room!  
I weep, weep! For my love,  
My dearest love!

Blümlein blau! Blümlein blau!  
Verdorre nicht!  
Vöglein süß! Vöglein süß!  
Du singst auf grüner Heide.  
Ach, wie ist die Welt so schön!  
Ziküth! Ziküth! Ziküth!

Blue little flower! Blue little flower!  
Do not wither, do not wither!  
Sweet little bird! Sweet little bird!  
Singing on the green heath!  
Ah, how fair the world is!  
Jug-jug! Jug-jug!

Singet nicht! Blühet nicht!  
Lenz ist ja vorbei!  
Alles Singen ist nun aus!  
Des Abends, wenn ich schlafen geh’,  
Denk’ ich an mein Leide!  
An mein Leide!

Do not sing! Do not bloom!  
For spring is over!  
All singing now is done!  
At night, when I go to rest,  
I think of my sorrow!  
My sorrow!

This is the only text of the cycle that was not written entirely by Mahler himself, but is a modified version of the text from the folkloric collection *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*. The first two stanzas of the original folkloric song are as follows:

Wann mein Schatz Hochzeit macht,  
Hab ich einen traurigen Tag:  
Geh ich in mein Kämmerlein,  
Wein um meinen Schatz.

When my love has her wedding-day,  
I shall have a sad day:  
I shall go into my little room,  
weep for my love.

Blümlein blau, verdorre nicht,  
Du stehst auf grüner Heide;  
Des Abends, wenn ich schlafen geh,  
So denk ich an das Lieben.

Blue little flower, do not wither,  
You stand on the green heath;  
At night, when I go to rest,  
I think of love.

It is interesting to examine how Mahler adapted the text into his version. Not only did he expand the semantic field of the different descriptions for instance by adding the “dark little room”, but in doing this he introduced an interesting metaphor: the wayfarer doesn’t just go into a “dark little room” physically (i.e. *geographically*), but he also sinks into a deep state of depression. Furthermore, I believe Mahler—purposefully or

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23 Translated by Richard Stokes, retrieved from https://www.oxfordlieder.co.uk/song/1081, accessed April 8, 2019. Eventually, emphasis in italics has been added.
25 My translation, following Richard Stokes’ translation of the lied in order to facilitate analogies.
unknowingly—removed some ambiguities in the original: in the second stanza of the original song, for instance, the phrase “Blümlein Blau, verdorre nicht/ Du stehst auf grüner Heide” (Blue little flower, do not wither/ You stand on the green heath) is ambiguous in that it might be addressing a person—the beloved—or an actual flower. In Mahler’s version, the ambiguity is removed in that it is the bird who is on the heath and therefore the wayfarer is addressing an actual bird (“Ziküth, Ziküth”, and so on). However, Mahler added another ambiguity instead: “Ach, wie ist die Welt so schön” (Ah, how fair the world is!). As opposed to second lied, where the words that the wayfarer imagines as being spoken by the birds and flowers are given in inverted commas, in this case they are not, and thus it follows that it is the wayfarer who utters them. This euphoric passage is, however, short-lived and the instability of the wayfarer is evident in the third stanza of the lied: “Singet nicht! Blühet nicht!” (Do not sing! Do not bloom!). With this third stanza, Mahler expanded the “emotional limits” of the text, firstly by adding the euphoric passage and secondly by adding the negative reaction in the end. For instance, “denk’ ich an das Lieben” (I think of love) changed into “denk’ ich an dein Leiden” (I think of my sorrow).

At first sight, the text looks like a typical romantic poem about the misfortunes of unrequited love. However, I argue that the matter is more complex. The song opens with the wedding motif (Figure 1), a turn on the tone A followed by a rising and falling fourth (D–A). The motif is first played by the B♭ clarinet and the triangle, which accompanies with a rhythmical and brilliant sound. The triangle, together with the Ds in the harp, sounds like wedding bells. It should be noted that even though the tense of the opening lament is the present, in German it actually represents an action either in the future or in a hypothetical time, something like “alas, when my beloved shall have her wedding day”. I argue that precisely because of this, the wedding motif is highly important for the whole cycle as it introduces a tale of cognitive trompe l’œil—or rather, trompe l’oreille—in which the wayfarer makes the listener believe in a certain state of the world that actually corresponds to his inner, psychological world: If the wedding is hypothetical or in the future, it means that the wedding motif is heard as such only in the mind of the wayfarer. I suggest that he is reinterpreting the sounds of nature through his melancholy as if they were wedding bells.
At measure 19–20, the timpani play the interval F♯–B–F♯–B repeatedly, symbolizing steps, while the wayfarer sings “geh’ ich in mein Kämmerlein” (I will go to my little room). In consequence with the text, after the first stanza (measure 44) there is a caesura, with a clear change in character and a modulation to E♭ major. As I have mentioned above, the wayfarer sings “Blümlein blau” (Blue little flower), and it is unclear whether he addresses a real flower or his beloved. Immediately afterwards (from measure 49 onwards) he addresses a bird (“Vöglein süß”), and the woodwinds and first violins illustrate the passage with “birdlike” melodies, which appear as a major-scale variant of the wedding motif at measure 56 (Figure 2). I believe that this further reinforces the interpretation that it is the sounds of birds that make the wayfarer imagine a wedding scene. The idyllic scene gives him a large dose of enthusiasm as he exclaims “Ach! Wie ist die welt so schön” (“Oh, it is such a lovely world”). Then follows a modulation to D minor, in accordance with the more somber character of the text. At measure 64 there is a new caesura and the wayfarer sings in the same manner as in the beginning. In a contradicto-ry declaration, he orders the birds not to sing, the flowers not to blossom (“Singet nicht! Blühet nicht!”), the wedding motif is repeated throughout the lied in the woodwinds, constantly reminding the wayfarer of his unhappy love. The last phrase, at measure 94, is a rhythmic interval of a fourth (D–F) in the double bass, which, together with the

flutes, emphasizes the minor character in the context of the G-minor chord. It also sets rhythmical and tonal ground for the following lied.

2.2. Ging’ heut’ morgen über’s Feld

Doubtlessly the most optimistic of the cycle, this lied depicts the wayfarer’s stroll through a field in the morning, where he stumbles upon the beauties of nature. This, however, reminds him of his misery and finally puts him in a gloomy mood:

Ging heut’ Morgen über’s Feld,
Tau noch auf den Gräsern hing;
Sprach zu mir der lust’ge Fink:
„Ei du! Gelt? Guten Morgen! Ei gelt?
Du! Wird’s nicht eine schöne Welt? Schön
Welt?
Zink! Zink! Schön und flink!
Wie mir doch die Welt gefällt!“

I walked across the fields this morning,
Dew still hung on the grass,
The merry finch said to me:
‘You there, hey –
Good morning! Hey, you there!
Isn’t it a lovely world?
Tweet! Tweet! Bright and sweet!
O how I love the world!’

Auch die Glockenblum’ am Feld
Hat mir lustig, guter Ding’,
Mit den Glöckchen, klinge, kling, klinge, kling,
Ihrer Morgengruß geschellt:
„Wird’s nicht eine schöne Welt?
Kling! Kling! Kling! Kling! Schönes Ding!
Wie mir doch die Welt gefällt! Heiah!“

And the harebell at the field’s edge,
Merrily and in good spirits,
Ding-ding with its tiny bell
Rang out its morning greeting:
‘Isn’t it a lovely world?’
Ding-ding! Beautiful thing!
O how I love the world!’

Und da fing im Sonnenschein
Gleich die Welt zu funkeln an;
Alles, alles Ton und Farbe gewann
Im Sonnenschein!
Blum’ und Vogel, groß und klein!
„Guten Tag! Guten Tag!
Ist’s nicht eine schöne Welt?
Ei du, gelt? Ei du, gelt?
Schöne Welt!“

And then in the gleaming sun
The world at once began to sparkle;
All things gained in tone and colour!
In the sunshine!
Flower and bird, great and small.
‘Good day! Good day!
Isn’t it a lovely world?
Hey, you there?! A lovely world!’

Nun fängt auch mein Glück wohl an?!
Nun fängt auch mein Glück wohl an?!
Nein, nein, das ich mein’,
Mir nimmer, nimmer blühen kann!

Will my happiness now begin?
Will my happiness now begin?
No! No! The happiness I mean
Can never bloom for me! 27

27 Translated by Richard Stokes, retrieved from https://www.oxfordlieder.co.uk/song/1082, accessed April 8, 2019. Eventually, emphasis in italics has been added.
The lied begins the walking motif (Figure 3), a rhythmic staccato in the flute and the piccolo which symbolize steps, as the wayfarer sings “Ging heut’ morgen über’s Feld” (I went across the field this morning). The whole lied, and especially the beginning, has a strong pastoral character.\(^\text{28}\) Mahler uses the same interval of a falling fourth (D–A) in the walking motif as in the ending of the wedding motif in the first lied. At measure 6, the wayfarer interprets what the bird sings (“sprach zu mir der lust’ge Fink”, the merry finch said to me) as being positive declaration about the beauty of the world: “Wird’s nicht eine schöne Welt! Ei, du! Gelt!” (Hey! Isn’t it?! Isn’t it becoming a fine world?). This phrase is mirrored by the oboe, showing the connection between the natural sound and his interpretation of it. Further on, at measure 32, the glockenspiel also musically illustrates what the wayfarer “hears” from the Glockenblume (Harebells). This example of synesthesia reinforces in my opinion the interpretation that much of the related depiction is happening inside the wayfarer’s mind. Not only does he “hear” the bells of the flower, but he imagines in it a comment about the world as well: “Wie mir doch die Welt gefällt” (Oh, how I love the world!). Mahler writes in the score that that phrase should be sung “übermutig” (overconfident), suggesting that the wayfarer is inspired by the harebell’s overconfidence in the beauty of the world.

\[\text{Figure 3. Walking motif}\]

\[\text{Figure 4. “Und da fing im Sonnenschein”}\]

\[\text{Figure 5. “Nun fängt auch mein Glück wohl an?!”}\]

\(^{28}\) Floros goes further and argues for a direct link between this lied and Beethoven’s *Pastoral Symphony*. Floros, *Gustav Mahler II*, p. 149.
The lied is characterized by an almost ostinato repetition of the walking motif: At measure 64, the cello pizzicato works as an echo of the motif (Figure 4) as the wayfarer sings “Und da fing im Sonnenschein” (And then in the gleaming sun). The pastoral depiction returns at measure 103, but in a rather cloudy mood created the harmonic interval of a second in the flutes (E and F♯), as opposed to the octave (A) in the opening of the lied.

This sets the ground for the bitter change of character, when the wayfarer asks himself, again with the same melody as walking motif, whether his luck will mirror all the beauty that he sees around him (“Nun fängt auch mein Glück wohl an?, Figure 5). The sad answer comes at measure 115, when he comes to the conclusion that “Nein, nein, das ich mein’/ Mir nimmer, nimmer blühen kann!” (No, no, the happiness I mean/can never blossom). After that follows a short cadenza, a melancholic falling melody by the first violin, closing the curtain on the lied.

2.3. Ich hab’ ein glühend’ Messer

This lied has a very turbulent mood and depicts a scene of utter despair by the wayfarer in which reality and dream get confused with each other and ends by devastating him:

Ich hab’ ein glühend Messer,  \hfill I’ve a gleaming knife,
Ein Messer in meiner Brust,  \hfill A knife in my breast,
O weh! O weh! Das schneid’t so tief!  \hfill Alas! Alas! It cuts so deep
in jede Freud’ und jede Lust.  \hfill Into every joy and every bliss,

So tief! So tief!  \hfill So deep, so deep!
Es schneid’t so weh und tief!  \hfill It cuts so sharp and deep!
Ach, was ist das für ein böser Gast!  \hfill Ah, what a cruel guest it is!
Nimmer hält er Ruh’,  \hfill Never at peace,
nimmer hält er Rast,  \hfill Never at rest!
Nicht bei Tag, noch bei Nacht,  \hfill Neither by day
wenn ich schlief!  \hfill Nor by night, when I’d sleep!
O weh! O weh!

Wenn ich den Himmel seh’,  \hfill When I look into the sky,
Seh’ ich zwei blaue Augen steh’n!  \hfill I see two blue eyes!
O weh! Oh weh!  \hfill Alas! Alas!
Wenn ich im gelben Felde geh’,  \hfill When I walk in the yellow field,
Seh’ ich von fern das blonde Haar  \hfill I see from afar her golden hair
Im Winde weh’n!  \hfill Blowing in the wind! Alas! Alas!
O weh! O weh!

Wenn ich aus dem Traum auffahr’  \hfill When I wake with a jolt from my dream
Und höre klingen ihr silbern Lachen,  \hfill And hear her silvery laugh,
O weh! O weh!
Ich wollt’, ich läg’ auf der Schwarzen Bahr’,
Könnt’ nimmer die Augen aufmachen!
Alas! Alas!
I wish I were lying on the black bier,
And might never open my eyes again!29

This lied opens with the knife motif (Figure 6), a rhythmical motif consisting of a D-minor chord and an arpeggio C♯dim7 played fortissimo by the whole orchestra in a stormy, wild mood (“Stürmisch, wild”). I argue that the knife motif depicts a psychotic episode in which the wayfarer suffers from restless, heavy breathing. At measure 8, the wayfarer exclaims “Oh weh” (Alas!) with a half-tone fall. At measure 12, a mocking laughter sounds in the trumpets in the form of a piercing, metallic sound. The stormy mood continues along with the wayfarer’s lament over his state of despair and of having “ein glühend’ Messer […] in meiner Brust” (a red-hot knife […] in my chest).

At measure 41 the character of the song changes into a softer, dreamlike state. A clear caesura happens at measure 45, still in the softer character of the previous measures. The flutes play a rhythmic staccato reminiscent of the walking motif of the second lied. The wayfarer returns at measure 46 in a much calmer state, telling of his visions, of seeing the blue eyes of his beloved in the sky and her golden hair in the yellow field. At measure 49, precisely at the word “Augen” (eyes), the chord played by the orchestra (F–G–D♯) has an uncanny sound, illustrating the uncanny presence of the eyes, impossible to hide from.

After this trancelike part, the stormy mood returns at measures 57–59 and the disruption is complete at measure 60 when the wayfarer exclaims “wenn ich aus dem Traum auffahr’/ und höre klingen ihr silbern’ Lachen” (When I wake with a jolt from my dream/ and hear her silvery laugh). The explicit content of the phrase, together with the dreamlike character of measures 45–59, encourages a direct interpretation of the visions of blue eyes and golden hair as being a dream. The “silvery laughter” which the wayfarer hears after he awakens from his dream is rather piercing (fortissimo) and features the triangle and Fs in the flutes, the same note as the wayfarer sings (enharmonically spelled as E♯). It is reminiscent of the mocking laughter played in the trumpets at measure 12 and represents once again a negative presence in the wayfarer’s mind.

29 Translated by Richard Stokes, retrieved from https://www.oxfordlieder.co.uk/song/1083, accessed April 8, 2019. Eventually, emphasis in italics has been added.
As a consequence of his malaise, at measure 68 the wayfarer expresses suicidal thoughts: “Ich wollt’ ich lăg’ auf der schwarzen Bahr/ kŏnnt’ nimmer, nimmer mehr die Augen aufmachen” (I wish I were lying on the black bier/ and might never open my eyes again). The knife motif returns at measure 75, although this time piano pianissimo and decrescendo even more. There follows a cadenza by the violin at measure 78 together with the sounding of the Tamtam. The presence of Death as a theme is undeniable, as Floros states that “Mahler does not use the Tamtam as a simple coloratura, but it is always a symbolic representation of Death”. However, interpreting this cadenza as the death of the wayfarer would be too literal. I argue that Death is introduced into the story as a presence occupying the wayfarer, as is evident from his suicidal attitudes, but not that it represents his actual death.

2.4. Die zwei blauen Augen

The final lied of the cycle marks the point in which the wayfarer has once again to move to another place, the inherent consequence of having seen the blue eyes of his beloved. He sets out in the middle of the night and nobody bids him farewell, and he in turn recalls an idyllic place with a Linden tree, where all was well and no misery existed:

Die zwei blauen Augen von meinem Schatz, The two blue eyes of my love
Die haben mich in die weite Welt geschickt. Have sent me into the wide world.
Da mußt’ ich Abschied nehmen vom allerliebsten Platz! I had to bid farewell
O Augen blau, warum habt ihr mich angeblickt? To the place I loved most!
Nun hab’ ich ewig Leid und Grämen! O blue eyes, why did you look on me?
Grief and sorrow shall now be mine forever!

Ich bin ausgegangen in stiller Nacht, I set out in the still night,
in stiller Nacht wohl über die dunkle Heide. Across the dark heath.
Hat mir niemand Ade gesagt! No one bade me farewell!
Ade! Ade! Ade! Farewell! Farewell! Farewell!
Mein Gesell’ war Lieb und Leide! My companions were love and sorrow!

A linden tree stands by the roadside,
Da hab’ ich zum ersten Mal im Schlaf geruht! There I first found peace in sleep!
Unter dem Lindenbaum, Under the linden tree
Der hat seine Blüten über mich geschneit, It snowed its blossom on me,
Da wußt’ ich nicht, wie das Leben tut, I was not aware then of how life does,
War alles, alles wieder gut! And all, all was well once more!
Ach, alles wieder gut! All, well once more!
Alles! Alles! Lieb’ und Leid
Und Welt und Traum! All! All! Love and sorrow,
And world and dream! 31

The lied begins as a march (“Alla Marcia”). Floros mentions that the original manuscript actually stated “Im tempo des Trauermarches” (Tempo of the funeral march), but this designation was later removed from subsequent editions. 32 However, I argue that although the designation was removed, the overall sound of the lied remains that of a funeral march that should be sung “Mit geheimnisvoll schwermütigen Ausdruck. Ohne Sentimentalität” (With mysteriously melancholic expression. Without sentimentalism). The melody is recitative-like (measures 1–31), giving the feeling of an epilogue comparable to the last line in Schubert’s Erlkönig, in which the feverish child finally dies in his father’s arms. Deborah Stein argues that in Schubert’s case “the dramatic ‘recitative’

31 Translated by Richard Stokes, retrieved from https://www.oxfordlieder.co.uk/song/1084, accessed April 8, 2019. Eventually, emphasis in italics has been added.
32 Floros, Gustav Mahler II, p. 140.
ending recalls the poetic associations of the Erlking as representing something ‘distant’”. In a comparable way, the wayfarer distances himself from the love story by moving forward and, quite literally, moving away from the place of his beloved by reciting the narrative: “die [Augen] haben mich in die weite Welt geschickt./ Da muß’ ich Abschied nehmen vom allerliebsten Platz!/ O Augen blau, warum habt ihr mich angeblickt?/ Nun hab’ ich ewig Leid und Grämen!” ([the eyes] have sent me into the wide world./ I had to bid farewell to the place I loved most!/ O blue eyes, why did you look on me?/ Grief and sorrow shall now be mine forever!).

Figure 7. Eyes motif

The text begins in a declamatory manner with “Die zwei blauen Augen…” (The two blue eyes…) and with the eyes motif (Figure 7), which consists of the phrase E–F♯–G, followed by three Gs in a march rhythm. Further on, the interval of a falling half-tone at “Ade” (measures 27–28) is the same “Oh weh” in the third lied, making a connection between the act of not being told farewell by anyone and that of pain. At measure 35, the timpani “die away” (morendo) and lead to a caesura at measure 37, after which the harp changes rhythm and thus the mood from “walking” to “dreaming”. From measure 40, the performance instructions read “Leise bis zum Schluß” (quietly, softly until the end), and this marks the beginning of an oneric depiction of a Linden tree as an ideal place the wayfarer’s past.

This depiction includes a pastoral passage in the first and second violins (measure 46ff.) and birds at measure 48 (interval of a sixth in the first and second violins). The Linden tree is a place characterized by peace and serenity: “da hab’ ich zum ersten Mal im Schlaf geruht” (“where I first found peace in sleep”), a place that the wayfarer must leave because of his unrequited love. After singing “War Alles wieder gut! Alles! Alles! Lieb’ und Leid! Und Welt und Traum” (“And all, all was well once more! All! All!/ Love and sorrow, and world and dream!”), the uncanny presence of the blue eyes reappears at measure 64–67 in the form of the eyes motif, reminding the wayfarer of the unfortunate existence to which he is now eternally bound.

34 Mitchell suggests the existence of an actual tree called by Mahler his “Liebling” (to be translated either as “beloved” or “favorite”), “a solitary lime-tree on Herr Baumgarten’s estate, from the top of which Mahler could survey the Danube”: Mitchell, Gustav Mahler: The Early Years, p. 89.
3. Discussion

Although the *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* are marked by the wayfarer’s tragic experience of unrequited love and lack of recognition, I argue that these misfortunes are essential to his role. He has, in an implicit, subconscious way, made the decision between abandoning his identity as a *fahrende Geselle* or abandoning his beloved. Following this statement, Slavoj Žižek’s analysis of the sinking of the Titanic in the homonymous film from 1997 proves to be very relevant for the “wayfarer case”. According to him, the true tragedy of the film would have been that the newly formed couple Rose and Jack (portrayed by Kate Winslet and Leonardo DiCaprio) would have arrived safely in New York and the love affair would have faded away after “the first three weeks of intense sex”.35 The very fact that Jack drowns is essential for the love affair to continue in the Imaginary order, it is a lack in the positive sense of the word, a lack that creates meaning. Žižek further interprets Jack’s role as a mere restructuration of Rose’s ego, in that she finds an identity in the upper-class through the contact with the former’s lower-class origin. In the same way, I argue that the wayfarer constructs his ego through the unhappy love and that it is this very paradox of unhappiness that makes him ontologically possible. With this in mind, I suggest that, upon the question *Che vuoi?* (“you demand something from me, but what are you aiming at through this demand”),36 the wayfarer’s actual desire is for the wedding of in the first lied to happen. He is implicitly begging for his beloved not to love him, as this is essential to his own existence.

The connection between nature and emotions is one of the key elements of the romantic period, a time when (capitalized) Nature, the ultimate source of inspiration, was the artist’s biggest deity. The wayfarer does accordingly extract much satisfaction from the nature that surrounds him, although this beauty ultimately produces the opposite effect on him, that of dejection and hopelessness. The wayfarer’s last remark in the second lied “Nein, nein, das ich mein’/ mir nimmer, nimmer blühen kann” (No! No! The happiness I mean/ Can never bloom for me!) should, in my opinion, be taken literally: he is in a way foreboding the fact that his existence depends directly on his unhappiness. His lament should thus not be understood as a rhetorical figure; it is, on the contrary, the very definition upon which the ontology of the wayfarer lies: *sum miserabilis, ergo sum.*

(I am miserable, therefore I am). This however, is at a subconscious level: it is not a matter of happiness, but a matter of the identity that steers the wayfarer’s desires.

I argue that this conflicted relation with the surrounding beauty of late spring or summer is an extension of the subconscious conflicts that regard the wayfarer’s identity and his relation to beauty. Already in the third stanza of the first song (“Singet nicht [...]”), Mahler has established the identity of the wayfarer as the pathetic (i.e. with pathos), sad figure of the person unrecognized by society—evident in the fact that he resorts to birds and flowers as dialogue partners, or that nobody greets him farewell when he leaves—but who, paradoxically, builds his individuality through this lack of recognition, as something which corresponds to the expected characteristics of the wayfarer.

The wayfarer’s destructive behavior can be understood through what Freud called Repetition compulsion, summed up by Lawrence Kramer as “the living-over of a painful action in defiance of the pleasure-principle”.37 In this context, Kramer further remarks that “Lacan’s psychoanalysis posits unconscious repetition as the fate of the ego that is trapped in so-called Imaginary relationships—that is, one that is dependent on imagined or embodied alter-egos. [...] The self, in fact, is what becomes the image, a mere alter-ego for the figure who captivates it, to whom it also becomes blind”.38 This remark, originally made regarding Wordsworth’s “The Thorn”, can easily be applied to the Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen: the wayfarer is, in a way, trapped in an Imaginary relationship (an alter-ego, as expressed above) that is defined by his unhappiness. His death drive pushes him further into the repetition of this misery because, tragically, it is the only possible way for him to live.

In trying to find the origins of this destructive behavior, I find an analogy between the correlation “blue eyes of the beloved=moving away” and the psychoanalytic concept of the Symptom, i.e. the so called “return of the repressed”: “processes beyond conscious thought that erupt and disrupt everyday speech and experience”.39 This should not, however, be interpreted as the eyes being a negative, harmful presence, since the symptom as such is highly functional for the performance of a specific role, in this case, the role of the distressed and melancholic wayfarer. As Evans suggests in his Introductory

38 Ibid., p. 32.
Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis, “Lacan follows Freud in affirming that neurotic symptoms are formations of the unconscious, and that they are always a compromise between two conflicting desires”. The conflicting desires functioning in the wayfarer’s unconscious might thus be the desire for his beloved, on the one hand, and the desire for suffering and melancholy without which his life would lack the proper pathos to continue as a wayfarer.

Following this conclusion, I argue that the eyes of the beloved, with the uncanny sound attached to them, represent the Lacanian Real in the wayfarer’s psychology: “a hard kernel resisting symbolization, dialecticization, persisting in its place, always returning to it”. The wayfarer shows himself incapable of processing the blue eyes into the Symbolic order, but chooses instead to act against them, moving from the place. Thus the phrase “die [Augen] haben mich in die weite Welt geschickt./ Da mußt’ ich Abschied nehmen vom allerliebsten Platz!/ O Augen blau, warum habt ihr mich angeblickt?/ Nun hab’ ich ewig Leid und Grämen!” (“[the eyes] have sent me into the wide world./ I had to bid farewell to the place I loved most!/ O blue eyes, why did you look on me?/ Grief and sorrow shall now be mine forever!) posit a very explicit explanation of the wayfarer’s psychology. By “looking” at him, the eyes have become a structuring part of the wayfarer’s reality. As Žižek explains it, “[t]he paradox of the Lacanian Real, then, is that it is an entity which, although it does not exist (in the sense of ‘really existing’, taking place in reality), has a series of properties—it exercises a certain structural causality, it can produce a series of effects in the symbolic reality of subjects”.

The eyes as the Lacanian Real have most overtly sent the wayfarer into the wide world. What is, then, the imaginary balance that this Lacanian Real comes to disrupt? The peaceful, idyllic Linden tree episode.

The Linden tree scene in the last lied is an open door for intertextuality, as one cannot help thinking about Schubert’s homonymous lied from the cycle Winterreise. Both lieder have in common the idyllic quality of their description, and thus represent a state of the world prior to castration anxiety: the tree setting symbolizes a pre-phallic (pre-symbolic) state in which the subject has not developed a sense of lack by contact with

42 Ibid., p. 183.
the Lacanian Real, (the blue eyes of his beloved). Žižek describes this process as follows:

at the beginning we have a non-structured, pre-symbolic, imaginary homeostatic state of things, an indifferent balance in which the relations between subjects are not yet structured in a strict sense—that is, through the lack circulating between them. And the paradox is that this symbolic pact, this structural network of relations, can establish itself only in so far as it is embodied in a totally contingent material element, a little-bit-of-Real which, by its sudden irruption, disrupts the homeostatic indifference of relations between subjects. In other words, the imaginary balance changes into a symbolically structured network through a shock of the Real.44

The Linden tree is a place characterized by peace and serenity: “da hab’ ich zum ersten Mal im Schlaf geruht” (“where I first found peace in sleep”). This peace and order are disrupted by the “shock of the Real”. As was stated in the analysis of the fourth lied, the wayfarer is once again tormented by the uncanny presence of the blue eyes as they reappear at measures 64–67 in the form of the eyes motif, reminding the wayfarer that the idyllic past is over and that he now has a lack to which he is now eternally bound.

Stuart Feder gives a different (mis)interpretation of the Linden-tree episode: “[i]n the end […] life is unbearable for the hero and he lies down under a linden tree and sleeps. As oblivion is represented, we realize that he has taken his own life.”45 I argue that the first of these two statements builds upon a misreading of the text: the wayfarer refers to an episode that happened before the narrative as he declares “Da hab’ ich zum ersten Mal in Schlaf geruht!” (There I first found peace in sleep!). It does not in any way mean something that is actively done by the wayfarer at the moment, but is rather an idyllic, pre-symbolic description as I have shown above. As to the second statement, i.e. interpreting the Linden-tree episode as a suicide scene, I believe that, although viable as an interpretation, it seems to me too grandiose. The “oblivion” described by Feder should not be taken at face value as an indication of suicide, but is rather to suggest the symbolic death of the wayfarer in accordance to what Žižek calls “You only die twice”.46 By becoming aware of the Real (the blue eyes), the “symbolic destiny” of the wayfarer is defined and this thus marks his symbolic death: “Lacan conceives this difference between the two deaths as the difference between real (biological) death and its symbolization, the ‘settling of accounts’, the accomplishment of symbolic destiny (deathbed

44 Žižek. The Sublime Object of Ideology, p. 207.
confession in Catholicism, for example).” Far from being less tragic than a suicidal interpretation, this should be read as the opposite: by being symbolically dead, the wayfarer cannot but fulfill his role of miserable unhappiness until—finally—he can be relieved by his second, biological, death.

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47 Žižek. The Sublime Object of Ideology, p. 150.
4. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore the interpretative possibilities of a hermeneutical-psychoanalytical analysis of the Gesellen cycle. As I have shown, concepts from psychoanalysis like Freud’s Repetition compulsion, the Symptom and Lacan’s three Orders can be very productive in trying to understand the psychology of a fictitious character, in this case the wayfarer. With the results that I have extracted from such an analysis, one could possibly take the interpretation a step further and attempt to understand the psychology of the creator of the cycle, Gustav Mahler.

As was mentioned in the introduction, the Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen were dedicated to the singer Johanna Emma Richter, with whom Mahler had an unfortunate love affair during his time in Kassel. He also wrote other poems for her, one of which, as de La Grange states “brings her the good wishes of a ‘traveling companion’ (fahrenden Gesellen)”. One is tempted to find similarities between Mahler’s biography and the fate of the wayfarer as is the subject of this study. Can he possibly have felt identified with the figure of a “traveling companion” due to his occupation as a conductor travelling from city to city, day upon day? de La Grange certainly seems to think so: “Mahler, the fahrende Gesell (original italics), moved three times that winter […].” 48 Furthermore, a statement from Mahler’s letters that “In all probability, I shall leave here without having spoken a word of farewell to her”49 shows a kind of perverse symmetry with the wayfarer’s cry “hat mir niemand Ade gesagt!” (No one bade me farewell!). The Repetition compulsion comes again to mind, this time regarding Mahler himself, when one reads de La Grange’s remark “At any rate Johanna can hardly be blamed for hesitating to bind her fate to that of this quick-tempered little Kapellmeister, who seemed to delight in creating both enemies and material difficulties for him”. 50 Far from wanting to establish easy links between the composer’s life and his work, I want only to show how the concepts used in the study can be extrapolated into a broader context. However, the abuse of biographisms can undermine the very value of the open interpretation as was stated in the introduction, as the creation of an intersubjective meaning by analyzing a work of art with a hermeneutical perspective. This is essentially different from analyzing the artist behind the work.

48 de La Grange, Mahler: Volume One, p. 124.
49 Ibid., p. 125.
50 Ibid.
In all, it seems that by doing a hermeneutical musical analysis, the result becomes greater than the specific interpretation itself: the particular reading becomes one node in the wider hermeneutical and, in this case, psychoanalytical web of interpretations, which then in itself can become the ground for further attempts at analysis, be it of the same work or of something entirely different. But this expansion of the web of interpretation does not only enhance the musicological possibilities of the psychoanalytic theory, I am convinced that it is also the theory that becomes enriched and developed by its use in a musical context. In order to understand the intricacies of the subconscious, one has to look in all human cultural creations, as each provides a particular insight into the structures of the mind, and music is no exception.
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