

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)

Treue Liebe - True Love



Despite the beauty of Brahms' music, the subject of the poem is actually rather depressing. A girl waits by the edge of the sea for her boyfriend who does not arrive; as evening falls, she realises she may never see him again; the water laps at her feet and her longing to be reunited with her drowned lover overwhelms her; she is drawn irresistibly into the water and joins him in death.

Brahms was born in Hamburg, in North Germany, and was therefore close to the sea. He would have been very aware of the dangers which faced sailors and also of the many German legends about the dangerous lure of water. Here, however, the theme is not 'death by water', but the power of true love, which unites two young people even in death. Despite the tragedy, the girl is an

heroic figure, who demonstrates absolute faithfulness to her lover.

The opening of the accompaniment clearly suggests the lapping of the waves at the girl's feet, but the same pattern of notes soon comes to represent the girl's anxiety as she starts to fear the worst. This double use of a musical pattern for something concrete (the waves) and something emotional (fear) is an important feature of Romantic song.

After two identical verses, the third verse opens with a more excited piano figure. The replacement of the initial semiquavers by semiquaver triplets in rising phrases suggests extreme emotional turmoil. The girl is by now almost delirious with anxiety and realises what has happened. At the moment of drowning, where she is lured irresistibly into the water ('es zog sie zur Tiefe ...' 'those silent deep waters they draw her below') the music is almost overwhelming, just as the water overwhelms the girl. The music calms down in the short final section and the song ends as it began, with the suggestion of gently lapping waves – which provides a neat frame to the song.

*Ein Mägdlein saß am Meeresstrand
Und blickte voll Sehnsucht ins Weite.
»Wo bleibst du, mein Liebster, Wo weilst du so lang?
Nicht ruhen läßt mich des Herzens Drang.
Ach, kämst du, mein Liebster, doch heute!«*

*Der Abend nahte, die Sonne sank
Am Saum des Himmels darnieder.
»So trägt dich die Welle mir nimmer zurück?
Vergebens späht in die Ferne mein Blick.
Wo find' ich, mein Liebster, dich wieder,*

*Die Wasser umspielten ihr schmeichelnd den Fuß,
Wie Träume von seligen Stunden;
Es zog sie zur Tiefe mit stiller Gewalt:
Nie stand mehr am Ufer die holde Gestalt,
Sie hat den Geliebten gefunden!*

Edouard Ferrand (1813-1842)