

General impression

The first song of the Lieder ohne Worte Op. 19 by Mendelssohn honours its name: a very singable melody (cantabile...) with a flowing chordal accompaniment consisting of not too complex harmonies.

Surprising alterations here and there cause an effect which draws the attention of the attentive listener. The bass line moves “like a melody” in a, for the greater part, stepwise motion; first in contrary motion with the melody, later, in the contrasting middle section also in parallel thirds and ascending which creates an increase of tension. In this way the bass line disconnects itself from a strictly harmonic role, creating a two-part play with the melody.

Form

Globally we have a form we could label as A :|| B – A . Or:

A – A – B – A.

The transition to B is marked by a sudden colour change by the introduction of an e-minor chord.

Melody

The melody is not just good singable, but also balanced in proportions by grouping measures.

A	B	A
4+4+5	4+...4+2+1+1	4+4+8

When expectations are not fulfilled and a continuation is different than expected, that is the effect of “feints” or “diversions”, after which a satisfactory conclusion follows. This goes for the (“sudden”) a in measure 13 and the d in measure 43 for example.

Several times the composer plays with the expectation of the listener, for example by introducing alterations (the a in measure 13 and the d in measure 43) or a surprising altered chord with a special colour effect; a colour effect achieved by the change from the G major chord to a B major chord (25-27): this is a typical example of a mediant relation which plays in romantic music an important role as a means of expression.

Beginning

We hear two introductory measures consisting of two harmonies, I and V, composed out by a bass-line consisting of (1) – (3) – (2) – (5), after which the tonal playing field has been indicated: E major is the main or primary key.

E – B – :|| e – G – (concluding with the Upper Mediant B) – E .

A first phrase ends on the dominant of E (V) after which in the consequent the predictable conclusion is not (immediately) chosen (by resolving the a# as a leading tone to b), but by making it descend to a-natural (being part of a diminished seventh chord) followed by an extension which gives the conclusion already expected (I in B major) which functions as a dominant of the repeat.

In the beginning we hear a movement from E major to the dominant key of B major; a minor seventh is added after the repeat. In that way a bridge is created to the e-minor

chord (17), which gives a clear change of mood, marking the beginning of the contrasting central section.

The middle: contrasting section

In the contrasting section the mostly descending movement of the A part is replaced by an ascending melodic motion. This effect is being reinforced by the moving of the bass-line in parallel thirds with the melody. This results in a building up of tension, for which there exists a nice German term: "Steigerung".

The suggestion of e minor proves to be temporary; quickly there is a move to the use of the tones of the G-major scale, after which a short quasi cadenza fragment follows. The confirmation of G major as the new tonic is not followed through: the note b in the melody becomes part of a so called "phrygian cadence" (IV⁶-V). The b functions not as a third of a G major triad, but as the root of a B major triad.

The melody note b is being played around (b-c-b-a[#]-b) in measures 25-29 after which the B major chord resolves to the tonic of the main key E major and the A part reappears in a slightly modified form.

Harmonically the main key is not left again; everything comes to rest. A rest which is enhanced by the use of a pedal point on the tonic during the last 6 measures.