Die schöne Müllerin — “The Maid of the Mill” (or, “The Miller’s Pretty Daughter”)
D. 795 - Franz Schubert - 1823

Poetry by Wilhelm Müller

Oddly enough, many of the poems which comprise Wilhelm Müller's Die schöne Müllerin had their origins in a parlor game, in which Müller and friends would adopt different rôles in a sort of play, or charade; each person would portray his or her character by speaking in verse. Müller, who played the miller (why?) in these skits, was the only real writer among the group, and he gradually added to his poems until he had produced a complete cycle of 23. He published them in 1821, with a prologue and an epilogue, as part I of a somewhat satiric set, "Seventy-seven Poems from the Posthumous Papers of a Travelling Horn-player."

It seems that Schubert had been looking for a poetry cycle just of this sort. He saw the story unfolding in Müller's poems as a "folk myth of universal significance,"1 representing the kind of doom that can await the innocent in an evil world. Schubert may have begun work on the settings while hospitalized for some unknown health problem (perhaps syphilis). Later, staying with the Esterházy family, Schubert was unable to supervise the production of the first edition, which is riddled with errors. In several cases, confusion over the correct reading exists to this day.

Die schöne Müllerin has the vague plot of a young man who wanders the countryside. He starts his journey in No. 1 ("Das Wandern"), following a stream in No. 2 ("Wohin?"), and finding a charming mill in No. 3 ("Halt!") In No. 4 ("Danksagung an den Bach"), he learns there is a girl at the mill, but No. 5 ("Am Feierabend") reveals that she has no special regard for him. He wonders about his future with her in No. 6 ("Der Neugierige") and he makes his feelings very clear in No. 7 ("Unbeduld"). Songs 8, 9, and 10 ("Morgengruß," "Des Müller's Blumen," and "Tränenregen") describe ups and downs in his courtship. He rejoices in the seeming success of his wooing in No. 11 ("Mein!") but notices his neglected lute in No. 12 ("Pause"), wondering if the flapping of its green ribbon is symbolic of past—or future?—suffering. The ribbon is exchanged between the lovers in No. 13 ("Mit dem grünen Lautenbande"), but the young man fears that a hunter is a rival in No. 14 ("Der Jäger"); No. 15 ("Eifersucht und Stolz") makes it clear that his fears are warranted. His anger and frustration are reflected in nos. 16 and 17 ("Die liebe Farbe" and "Die böse Farbe"), and the 'faded flowers' of No. 18 ("Trockne Blumen") seem to be a symbol of his love. An imagined conversation with the stream in No. 19 ("Der Müller und der Bach") leads the young man to view the deep water as a peaceful haven, and in No. 20 ("Des Baches Wiegenlied"), the brook sings a lullaby to the young man who has drowned himself in its waters to escape from his sorrow and pain.

There are several texts on reserve in Kennedy Library that may assist you in discovering the highlights and/or special features of your Lied from this cycle.

---