

# This Isn't the First New Normal: Finding Correlations Between the Tambora Climate Disaster and the Development of Lieder in 1815–16

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**S**INCE THE START OF THE PANDEMIC, those of us in the music field have had to learn how to adapt in order to cope with a world in which close personal contact is temporarily not feasible. Our familiarity with technology has grown significantly, and many of us teach on platforms such as Zoom and FaceTime. Issues with latency over Internet connections have led to discoveries in utilizing products such as Cleanfeed and SoundJack in order to continue the art of live collaboration through high quality Internet connections. Those of us privileged enough to be in situations where in-person collaboration is still possible have learned to keep ourselves safe through physical distancing, masks, plexiglass barriers, and spread out performing arrangements.

This time is as good as any to rebuild our magnificent repertoire and reconsider what might be considered part of the canon. Opening our ears to works by women and transgendered composers is a major step, as is recognizing the immense contribution of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, Persons of color) composers to the repertoire, both now and in the past. One of the ways that classical music will survive is in better serving the diversity of communities that make up our planet—this includes performers, composers, and everyone who works in the field.

More than anything, the pandemic has taught us that professional development is not only a lifelong process, but also one that can be jumpstarted quickly, and no matter our age or experience in the profession, we possess the ability to grow and change in completely new directions if we keep an open mind.

Looking back into the past, can we learn anything from instances of significant disruption? Have there ever been historical events that shook musical life to its core and created conditions where composers needed to reinvent their genres?

## THE 19TH CENTURY'S BIGGEST CLIMATE EVENT

In April, 1815, Mount Tambora on the island of Sumbawa in the Lesser Sunda Islands of Indonesia erupted, spewing 93–118 Tg of stratospheric sulphate

Journal of Singing, May/June 2021  
Volume 77, No. 5, pp. 711–715  
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aerosols into the upper troposphere of the planet, making it the largest volcanic eruption in recorded history.<sup>1</sup> These aerosols caused significant cooling of the earth's climate over the ensuing months and years, as well as crop failures and food shortages throughout western Europe and North America. Gillen D'Arcy Wood wrote on the stark situation.

After perhaps a thousand years' dormancy, Tambora's devastating evacuation and collapse in April 1815 required only a few days. It was the concentrated energy of this event that was to have the greatest human impact. By shooting its contents into the stratosphere with such biblical force, Tambora ensured its volcanic gases reached sufficient height to seriously disable the seasonal rhythms of the global climate system, throwing human communities worldwide into chaos. The sun-dimming stratospheric aerosols produced by Tambora's eruption in 1815 spawned the most devastating, sustained period of extreme weather seen on our planet in perhaps thousands of years.<sup>2</sup>

The wide-ranging consequences of Tambora's fallout across the globe included North America's first economic depression (1816 was nicknamed "Eighteen hundred and froze to death"), cholera in India, crop failures in China, and disruption of North Atlantic currents that caused a temporary breakup of ice packs in the Arctic. In Europe, the spectacular sunsets of 1815 led to a cruel winter that extended for most of the next year, causing widespread famine across the continent. Wood's book, *Tambora: The Eruption That Changed the World*, provides a comprehensive look at this time, including how climate disruption influenced the work of John Keats, Percy Shelley, Mary Shelley, and Lord Byron in literature, as well as how aerosols in the stratosphere may have informed the color palette of John Constable's painting.

There is room for considerably more research on the effect that Tambora's global disruption had on European musical life and how composers adapted. A cursory look at compositional output in the years 1815, 1816, and 1817 shows a marked reduction in large-scale works, especially in the symphonic and operatic genres.<sup>3</sup>

### FAST INNOVATION IN THE LIED

Two composers stand out in terms of the number of major works written during this horrific time: Ludwig

van Beethoven and Franz Schubert, living within a short distance of each other in Vienna. Also notable are the genres in which they wrote during these years: solo piano works, chamber music, and especially lieder. Ian Ritchie's *Guardian* article, "How the year without a summer gave us dark masterpieces," looks at ways that certain composers' and writers' creative processes seem to have actually benefitted from such a difficult time (especially in terms of Prometheus-inspired works).

It was in 1816 that Schubert received his first ever professional commission, for a tantalizingly long-lost cantata called Prometheus, and the only work for which he was actually paid all year. An amazing moment of creative synchronicity occurred during that missing summer: at exactly the same time when Schubert composed his cantata, Byron wrote his epic poem Prometheus, Frankenstein was born and the seeds of Percy Shelley's Prometheus Unbound were sown. Something was in the air. Mt. Tambora, in her cataclysmic self-destruction, put more than just a vast cloud of volcanic ash into the atmosphere: she fired up the imaginations of artists to interpret their environment, reflect the climate and capture the spirit of the age.<sup>4</sup>

The state of lieder at the turn of the nineteenth century was, even with a few fine examples by Haydn and Mozart, still in a somewhat foundational stage; the eighteenth century lied was still a mostly strophic form with a simple chordal accompaniment. Fischer-Dieskau notes,

The intensified need for expression, after the period of mere artistic skill, also compelled concentration on piano accompaniment. Melody and a few sparse basic elements of continuo were not, by themselves, able to satisfy the new requirements. Instead, accompaniment was to be an integral part of composition. But it was not until the nineteenth century that the piano song fully became a form of artistic expression, and also set an authoritative tone for the development of music.<sup>5</sup>

Much of the change that Fischer-Dieskau mentions happened all at once in the years 1815 and 1816, and correlates with the time that the fallout from the Mount Tambora explosion was starting to become felt across Europe.

One of the most revolutionary compositions of all time was written during the closing months of 1815: "Erlkönig," written by an 18 year old Franz Schubert in

October of that year in the northwest suburbs of Vienna while living at his parents' house. His brilliant setting of the characters of Goethe's poem and psychological dimensions revealed in the piano's challenging octaves turned the pre-existing genre of lieder on its head, right at the beginning of his career. A fair copy of the work sent to Breitkopf & Härtel was mistakenly returned to Franz Schubert of Dresden, who angrily disavowed having written the work.<sup>6</sup> One could speculate that the song may have become so popular so quickly in the ensuing years because Schubert's depiction of a dying child at the hands of "a malevolent goblin of the Black Forest, who lured people, especially children, to destruction,"<sup>7</sup> may have hit too close to home for so many affected by the widespread famine across Europe in the years 1816–18.

"Erlkönig" was by no means an isolated composition in this genre; 1815 is regarded as Franz Schubert's *annus mirabilis*, with a massive compositional output that includes works for piano, voice, and larger ensembles. In the second half of the year, Schubert completed well over a hundred lieder, sometimes writing over half a dozen in one day.<sup>8</sup>

In late 1815, the mid-career Beethoven was embroiled in one of the more difficult periods in his personal life. Upon the death of his brother Kaspar, Ludwig entered a protracted legal battle with his sister-in-law Johanna over custody of her son Karl van Beethoven. Maynard Solomon's biography of Beethoven contains a detailed and lively account of Beethoven's life at this time.<sup>9</sup> Solomon also notes a significant drop in compositional output from 1815–1819, the exact years of the post-Tambora climate crisis in Europe.<sup>10</sup>

By February 1816, Beethoven had effected a temporary solution to his custody battle with Johanna, enrolling Karl in the Vienna boarding school of Kajetan Giannatasio del Rio. Beethoven then set out for Baden, where he found summer (or more appropriately for 1816, non-summer) quarters in the Baden suburb of Weikersdorf.<sup>11</sup> The repose of his Baden surroundings was the backdrop for the composition of the first of his great late-period works, the Piano Sonata in A major, Op. 101.

A few years before, Beethoven had written a series of love letters to an unknown recipient, either unsent or returned, and found in his possession after his death. Although the exact identity of the recipient of the Immortal Beloved letters is still in dispute, much of the

language and scenario of these letters found their way into *An die ferne Geliebte*, finished in April 1816 and regarded as the very first song cycle. What Beethoven brings to *An die ferne Geliebte* is a synthesis of deeply personal utterance and much stronger structural associations. Fischer-Dieskau writes:

... for the Lied he sought material which was of value in providing a suitable medium for the highly personal confession. He was the first to attempt to comprehend content as a complete whole, without losing himself in poetic detail. This overall view led him to be the first to conceive the form of the Lieder cycle... as it has seldom been realized with such thematic concentration since.<sup>12</sup>

In Beethoven scholarship, much is made of his personal circumstances at this time and how they informed the music that was written. What is fascinating and in need of future research is the relationship between the onset of Beethoven's late style, with its much stronger structural cohesion, perfection of Classical forms, and exploration of polyphonic texture, with the deepening economic and climate crisis in the region. What exactly was the weather like in the Austrian Empire at this time compared to the well documented catastrophes in Switzerland only a few hundred kilometers away? How was the economy affected? How much of this was Beethoven aware of and how might it have affected him?

The major leaps forward in the development of the lied with both "Erlkönig" and *An die ferne Geliebte* happened only a few months apart, and by two composers who both lived in the Vienna area, one already well known and the other at the start of his career, although it is unlikely that they would have met at this early juncture. In addition, the correlation between the effects of the Mount Tambora explosion and the development of the lied into a newly ascendent genre within the year is too fascinating to resist.

In order to argue for a more direct causation between the effects of Mount Tambora and the course of music composition in Europe in the years 1815–18, further research needs to be undertaken, especially regarding the relationship between the climate and economic situation of major European musical centers and the types of compositions written at this time, as well as correspondences between the changed circumstances of individual

composers and what they wrote. A deeper understanding of causation between the Tambora explosion and the course of European musical life in the years 1815–18 can inform a much larger exploration of how climate change and the arts are interrelated in our own age.

### TAMBORA TAKEAWAYS

What can we learn from the example of Beethoven and Schubert during the difficult years 1815–1818?

#### Creating output in an extremely difficult time.

Although 1815 was challenging for Schubert even before the hardships brought on post-Tambora, he nevertheless composed feverishly during this time. The Deutsch catalogue lists as many as 204 works written in 1815 and 180 in 1816, of which as many as 250 were lieder.<sup>13</sup> Beethoven's difficult personal life at this time resulted in a reduction of works written, but their quality, particularly with lieder, solo piano, and chamber music, has ensured that many of these works entered the canon.

**Solving problems.** Both Schubert and Beethoven transcended the limitations of the early lieder style in their own way. With *An die ferne Geliebte*, Beethoven discovered how to unify a group of songs into a fully formed song cycle with a consistent poetic theme and cohesive musical structure. Schubert's portrayal of the characters in "Erlkönig" through use of melody, scansion, and tessitura in the voice part, as well as creation of atmosphere through the relentless and newly independent piano part, opened up the possibilities of the entire art song genre for years to come.

**Working away from the limelight.** That Schubert was to write as many works as he did in the middle of the second decade of the nineteenth century, in complete obscurity and at the start of his career, is nothing short of miraculous. Many of these works would not be discovered or performed until after his death.

Since the beginning of 2020, our musical life has been completely upended. The loss of livelihood has created dire consequences for many in the musical profession. Nevertheless, if we keep creating output in our field, solving known problems, and doing it without the need for instant recognition, we too can create a body of work that can move both us and the profession forward as life slowly returns to normal in the coming months.

### NOTES

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**Christopher Foley** is a pianist dedicated to the fields of pedagogy, opera, contemporary music, art song, and chamber music. He is a former executive member of both the NATS Vancouver and Ontario chapters. He is on the faculty of the Royal Conservatory of Music and serves as Senior Examiner for the RCM's Certificate Program. Active in the field of

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