

**Fish roles in music:  
reaching for an understanding through synesthetic representation**  
by Francis Kayali  
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Composers from the Western Classical tradition have frequently sought to describe animals. The imitation by humans of bird calls or bird songs, an effect that can easily be achieved by whistling or by playing a wind instrument, most likely dates back to prehistory. This technique of direct mimesis is not limited to birds: for instance, violins can convincingly imitate the braying of a donkey and the sound and rhythm of a horse's step can be closely approximated using coconut shells.<sup>1</sup> Fish pieces cause a particular problem because, to human ears, fish do not make any recognizable characteristic sound. Indeed, fish produce a sound when they leap out of water. We are perhaps more familiar with the sound of a fish wiggling frantically on the shore, flapping rhythmically against the ground. Even the sounds made by the preparation of fish for consumption (the sound of a fish frying in a pan for instance) might be sufficiently evocative for a human audience. These last two possibilities tend to be unusable, because they call to mind the demise, the destruction, the appropriation of the fish, which is incompatible with most of its usual poetic functions (e.g. mystery, purity, or, as we will see, eroticism).<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, not only would the sound of a fish leaping out of the water be difficult to imitate using conventional orchestral instruments, but in fact, even if by some masterful scoring, or simply by playing a recording, one were to reproduce that very sound, it

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<sup>1</sup> Both effects are used by Ferde Grofé in his *Grand Canyon Suite*.

<sup>2</sup> The image of a panicked fish, beached on the shore, trying to flap his way frantically back into the water to avoid asphyxiation seems like an unsuitable theme until (perhaps) expressionism. Although it is no doubt a situation that occurred as far back as Antiquity, it is not evocative of a pastoral eden, rather it is evocative of the images which humans chose to ignore, regarding the origin of their food. Just like the lobster who is trying to find a way out of the boiling water, the flapping fish contradicts what we prefer to believe regarding the absence of animal suffering. All the coarser, the potential depiction of the frying fish meat would be, at best, comical.

would still fall short of a successful, evocative fish depiction. Fish and fish activities do not produce sonic material that is evocative of fish.

Composers did not remain in this impasse and found other ways of conveying the idea of fish. Take for example Franz Schubert's famous lied "Die Forelle" ("The Trout"), composed in 1816.<sup>3</sup> In order to clarify the function of the fish in this song, we must start by analyzing the text which Schubert chose to set, a poem by Christian Schubart (reproduced in Appendix A). First, we have an observer watching a "merry," "cheery" trout swimming capriciously in a brook. A fisherman then arrives with a fishing rod but, since the water is so clear, the trout can "see" everything and can avoid getting caught. The fisherman must resort to muddying the waters in order to finally catch the trout.

Even before the reader reaches the moral in the last two stanzas, which Schubert omitted in his setting of the song, it is quite clear that this is not a poem about a fish. In fact, fishermen find the story absurd, seeing as though disturbing the water is the surest way to scare fish away. But even before that point, what do we make of the narrator "watching the fish's *bath* in the clear brook?" Bathing is a human activity, not that of a fish. This anthropomorphism cannot be ascribed solely to poetry, rather it prompts the reader to see in the trout a beautiful young maiden (the German word for trout, "Forelle," is feminine). The poetic metamorphosis of the maiden into a trout calls to mind the genre of the metamorphosis story: this maiden comes to the brook, as other heroines come to the lake, to engage in shape shifting. In these stories, the maiden may become transformed into a beautiful swan,<sup>4</sup> a vicious snake, or something which is manifestly just

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<sup>3</sup> "Probably composed in spring 1816," according to Walther Dürr in the preface to: Franz Schubert, *Die Forelle*, ed. Walther Dürr, (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1975). The fifth version of the lied is reproduced in Appendix B.

<sup>4</sup> As in Tchaikovsky's ballet *Swan Lake*.

as astonishing: a naked maiden.<sup>5</sup> The metamorphosis unveils a magical secret to an unfortunate onlooker who must then be punished in the most severe of ways.

As we follow the parallel, the fisherman's twitching rod is not, precisely speaking, a fishing rod, rather a completely undisguised phallus. So ridiculously prominent, in fact, that the trout, offended by such a lack of subtlety, makes sure to avoid it, remaining in her clear, virgin waters. The ensuing muddying of the waters corresponds therefore to the loss of virginity, an act entirely at the hands of the fisherman ("the thief"). In fact, the description the fish's capture resembles most that of a rape. Evidently, the trout has no say in the matter, being completely at the mercy of the fisherman's superior cunning.

In this story, the role of the unfortunate onlooker is taken on by the narrator/observer. By all accounts, he must be a shy, sensitive, romantic, effeminate bystander (perhaps a Young Werther) who admires and covets the trout-maiden, but whose prize is swept away by a coarse male figure.<sup>6</sup> It is unlikely that this observer is a female, although Schubert did not specify whether the lied was to be sung by a man or a woman. A woman singer would only reinforce the hypothesis of a less-than-manly character for the onlooker.

The morals are perplexing because they are contradictory and get entangled between different layers of symbolism. This is likely one of the factors which prompted Schubert to eliminate them from his song. In the penultimate stanza, the trout's brook becomes the "golden fountain of youth." Yet, since the moral is about humans, rather than being "*in*" the water, they are "*at*" ("*am*") the fountain, in other words: nearby. This

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<sup>5</sup> As in the myth of Actaeon and Artemis (retold by Ovid in *The Metamorphoses*).

<sup>6</sup> Which also happens in Schubert's famous song cycle *Die Schöne Müllerin*, where a hunter comes and steals the narrator's beloved.

preposition adjustment, while needed (in order, no doubt, to avoid inappropriate visions of maidens bathing), is cause for dissonance later. The indication to flee in case of danger seems, at least upon first reading, to demand that one run *away* from the fountain of youth. Nevertheless, it is evident that the whole point is to remain there. The combination of the idea of fleeing with that of staying is awkward. The trout, at least, can flee *within* her brook.

The objective of the penultimate stanza is to put young maidens on their guard, so that they succeed in remaining young maidens. Suddenly, in the last paragraph, the author becomes concerned that, no doubt as a result of an overly strict application of this first suggestion (a zealotry which, apparently, constitutes a “lack of cleverness”), maidens will continually “*miss* the angling seducers.” This implies that, while there is a time when maidens must do all they can to escape from the seducers, there is also a time when maidens must (perhaps even *want to*) yield to their advances. Women, as portrayed in this poem, must balance the two diametrically opposed necessities. The “lack of cleverness” jab also testifies to the plentifulness and availability of angling seducers.

In this poem, the trout is first portrayed as gullible, easily tricked or betrayed, at the mercy of the fisherman’s cleverness, but later she is portrayed as overly picky or undiscerning. How frustrating for the onlooker, that his fate be sealed by these two negative and contradictory traits of the trout’s character! It would evidently not occur to him that he may be doomed by his own shyness. By remaining at a distance, on the bank, he demonstrates his preference for a platonic relationship, one of non-interactive adulation. This distance disqualifies him from the running. How could he possibly expect the trout to not “miss” him, since he is *not* among the angling seducers. Should the trout

leap out of the brook (here the brook represents a sort of realm of propriety that would have to be breached) to come and get him? Even if we accept this possibility, what makes him any more eligible than the fisherman?

The bitter narrator threatens: “you may bleed too late.” The theme of blood recurs throughout the poem for each of the three protagonists (“cold blood” for the fisherman, “raging blood” for the onlooker, and potentially “tardy” blood for those – women – who “miss the angling seducers”). This last blood represents again the loss of virginity, just like the mud in the water. What would make this happen too late? As one ages, one becomes less appealing, so perhaps one needs to settle for proportionally unappealing mates. Could this lead to a risk of rejection (being thrown back in the water)? Could this lead to barrenness? Or perhaps (and this would follow a certain self-centeredness and self-aggrandizing tendency proper to romantic narrators), by the time the trout allows herself to be caught, the observer, the Werther character, will have shot himself, or perhaps he will have found himself a better wife, and then the trout will have missed her chance to catch him. This sounds most like an empty threat, perfectly in line with the rest of the adolescent discourse.<sup>7</sup> Not high poetry, to be sure, and Schubert thankfully did away with all this confusing (and also, no doubt, confused) poly-directional puerile moral, kept the song focused on the trout, and subtly left the task of deriving a moral to the listener. The removal of the last two verses leads to a less damning portrayal of the trout, shown as a poor creature, entirely at the mercy of the fisherman.

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<sup>7</sup> Schubert himself was no adolescent, having written this poem in 1782 (according to <<http://www.schubbi.org/cfd/forelle.html>>, accessed December 11, 2006). He would have been 43. It is likely that ideas of what constitutes mature behavior are culturally (and thus also historically) dependent. In other words, this criticism may well be anachronistic.

Why choose a fish to symbolize a woman? Perhaps the fish's sudden movements and changes in trajectory appeared to be a good mirror for a young woman's fickle character, as seen from the viewpoint of a male narrator at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Amusingly, while the female character becomes a trout, both male characters remain humans. The difference in gender is amplified, becoming a difference in species, a species that can only survive by living in a different element (water, not air). Supposedly, once fished, the trout would "die," that is, she would turn into a human woman.<sup>8</sup>

Although the version Schubert chose, pruned of its morals, does make it somewhat easier to do, we cannot sustain even for a moment that this poem is truly about a fish. Nevertheless, the weaknesses in Schubert's text notwithstanding, the allegory should find its power in how true the dismay of the narrator rings to our ears. We might even consider the possibility of an identification mechanism, where the observer, much like Adorno when faced with the gaze of the dying animal,<sup>9</sup> identifies, even for a moment, a real trout as having been tricked, betrayed, in the same way that a human is wronged? Considering the historical context, doesn't pity for a fish seem far-fetched, and an ironic interpretation appear more likely? Nonetheless, the text's primary meaning concerns a human who pities a dying fish. By placing a maiden in the body of a fish, the

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<sup>8</sup> These metamorphoses bring to mind metempsychosis (reincarnation). To use the metamorphosis, as religions in fact tend to do, to represent a major change in life status such as the transition between youth and womanhood, innocence and adulthood, also aligns it with the other transitions of birth and death. The loss of virginity, because it is often accompanied (albeit after a number of months' delay) by the creation of new life, also demands a death. This death of youth may or not be amalgamated with the "petite mort" of sexual fulfillment. Cultures and religions often use animals to *symbolize* alternate human states beyond the default male adult: for instance, children are lambs, women are doves... or trouts. The symbol implies that, along with sharing certain selected characteristics of the animal (the lamb represents youth, liveliness, innocence – of sin, but also of intelligence) the human that is being symbolized (the child) is *as distant* from the default human (male, adult) as is the animal in the symbol (the lamb).

<sup>9</sup> Theodor Adorno, "People are looking at you," from *Minima Moralia*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1974), 105. (Reader)

path has been opened for an anthropomorphic perception of all fish. All trouts become, potentially, trapped maidens.

Let's return to Schubert's musical problem. Even if the poem is clearly not about a trout, the music still must evoke this primary meaning before all others. Because the trout is silent, as discussed above, Schubert needs to represent musically something else, something that isn't sonic. Whatever stimulus Schubert chooses to express musically, its transformation from a non-sonic to a sonic event will, by definition, constitute a synesthetic translation. Besides hearing, the list of human senses includes vision, smell, taste, touch (and what we may experience as subsets of touch – sensitivity to pressure, temperature, and pain), and balance.<sup>10</sup> The sense of balance would seem to have little pertinence to our experience of the trout, unless, for instance, we were to imagine that we ourselves are (within) a trout and perceive the sudden gyration caused by the fish taking a corner at high speed. Schubert's poem, unlike some others, isn't about imagining ourselves as a trout, but about coveting a trout, so a perception of balance doesn't come into play. The idea of representing musically the taste or the smell of a trout seems like an interesting challenge, but again, it isn't particularly pertinent to the poetics of the work at hand, although we could always prolong the story of the fisherman and the trout, and assume that the point of possession, the point of climax is not when the fish is caught, but rather when it is eaten. All these possible different steps and levels of the story are evidently collapsed into one, and it would be pointless to parse things out any further. We

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<sup>10</sup> Humans also have the sense of proprioception, which is the sense of the relative position of neighboring parts of the body. When this sense is impaired, for instance due to drunkenness, tasks such as standing with eyes shut may become impossible. This sense is, arguably, little affected by our trout. A composer trying to describe musically the experience of being drunk, however, would likely have to find ways of translating proprioceptive stimuli. Even though humans will traditionally only name "five senses" (vision, hearing, smell, taste and touch), the human experience has always involved all the senses, and it would thus be an error to exclude them from our analysis.

are thus left with, as could have been surmised from the outset, our foremost sense, vision. Vision is the sense we would turn to immediately rather than carefully examine all these other, more secondary (or even tertiary) ones. Even though the answer was obvious, it seems rather unwise to eliminate any of our senses from the list of potential candidates. It should be clear, particularly in light of the interesting thought experiments of Jakob von Uexküll quoted by Giorgio Agamben,<sup>11</sup> that animals indeed have sometimes superior versions of our own senses (like the dog's sense of smell so vividly described by Vicki Hearne<sup>12</sup>), as well as entirely new senses that we do not have (for example echo-location, or sensitivity to magnetic and electric fields), and that there is something profoundly enriching about trying to immerse ourselves, as much as our imaginations will allow us, into an animal's world.

In addition to all the senses, Schubert will likely seek to represent musically any intellectual elements that we associate with "trout." This can be something perfectly remote, as long as listeners are clued in to the association. Here's an amusing example of this, which, unfortunately, doesn't involve a trout, but does involve an animal. Near the end of Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro*, Figaro suspects that he is being cuckolded by his wife. The European tradition at the time believed that a cuckold would grow (either literally or figuratively, depending on how gullible one was) cuckold's horns, which looked like stag antlers. To punctuate the end of this angry aria by Figaro, Mozart added a prominent horn (as in French horn) passage (Fig. 1).

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<sup>11</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Open*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 45-47.

<sup>12</sup> Vicki Hearne, *Adam's Task* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 79-80. (Reader)

**Fig. 1:** Mozart, *Le Nozze di Figaro*<sup>13</sup>

Scene VIII, Recitative and Aria No. 27 “Aprite Un Po'Quegli Occhi” mm. 96-105.  
(vocal line and horn part only)

The image shows a musical score for two parts: Figaro (bass) and Cor. in Es (horn). The Figaro part is in bass clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat major). The lyrics are: "di - co, già o - gnu - no, già o - gnu - no lo sa, — il re - sto, il re - sto nol di - co, già o -". The Cor. in Es part is in treble clef with a key signature of one flat. The lyrics are: "gnu - no, già o - gnu - no lo sa, già o - gnu - no lo sa, già o - gnu - no lo". The Figaro part has a fermata over the first measure of the second system.

Il resto nol dico, già ognu lo sa!

*I won't say the rest, everyone knows it already!*

It is unclear whether the instrument, because of its name, “horn,” would have directly evoked the cuckold’s horns<sup>14</sup> to Mozart’s audience, or whether the chain of meaning is longer: the horn, because it is used for deer hunting evokes deer, and deer, in turn, evoke cuckoldry. Either way, this exemplifies how composers can find a way of musically representing a perfectly abstract concept, which doesn’t connect directly to any sensory stimulus (cuckoldry doesn’t look or sound like anything concrete). Once again, to be understood, this sign relies heavily on words and the context of the plot. In a non-programmatic symphony, French horns, even playing the same music, cannot evoke cuckoldry in and of themselves.

Such an extended chain of meaning will not have been necessary for Schubert to describe the trout. Yet the fish, by its un-sonic nature does force the composer to move from a level where he would be simply imitating a sound, to the point where he would have to seek and bring forth a “new” understanding of “trout.” Simultaneously, the composer’s work can only be effective if this understanding of “trout” has effectively

<sup>13</sup> Wolfgang A. Mozart, *The Marriage of Figaro, Complete Score* (New York: Dover, 1979), 370-371.

<sup>14</sup> It is interesting to note that both in French and English, the word used for the musical instrument (horn/cor) is the same (or almost the same) as the one used for the animal’s antlers (horn/corne) This is presumably due to the fact that the instrument was made from the animal part.

been in existence subconsciously in the minds of his audience, such that upon perceiving the new sign<sup>15</sup> the audience understands what it evokes.

As shown above, Schubert resorted to translating something visual. What does a trout look like? What does it look like *in time*? Unlike a painter whose work will generally be fathomed, comprehended over, at most, a number of seconds, Schubert has the luxury of representing his trout in time, which sends us not to visual “stills” of the trout, but rather to something more cinematic: ideas of movement, gestures, shapes, leaps, shimmering colors. We cannot dissociate the trout from its watery environment, and our watching it from the bank, from above, through a ripply boundary of wavelets. This is in contrast to the fish in Saint-Saëns’s aquarium (discussed below), who are seen from the *side*, through a pane of glass that slices vertically through the water, providing us with a vantage point onto the world of the fish that is intrusive and artificial, but that is perhaps also a more scientific, or more fish-like vantage point.

For Schubert, the trout can only be conceived of as seen through the wavelets of the brook, and thus the brook must accompany the trout in the synesthetic process. Schubert returns to the brook frequently in his songs: “Der Jüngling am Bache” (1812), “Am Bach in Frühlunge” and “Daphne am Bach” (1816) until the brook acquires a central role in his song cycle *Die schöne Müllerin* (composed four years later than “Die Forelle” in 1823). Schubert depicts the brook by using an endless string of rising and descending arpeggios, mirroring the water rolling endlessly over stones (Fig 2).

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<sup>15</sup> Is there ever any such thing as a brand new sign?

**Fig. 2:** Franz Schubert, “Wohin?” from *Die Schöne Müllerin*<sup>16</sup>



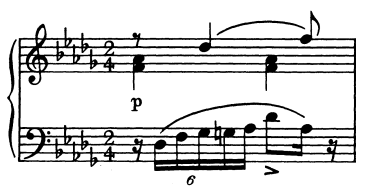


Of course, Schubert’s brook is very stylized, but it makes an effective compromise between the real stimuli: the sounds of stones at the bottom of a brook, our visual or tactile knowledge of the endlessly flowing water, on the one hand, and the conventions of classical piano music at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century on the other. The compromise involves transforming a chaotic or stochastic event such as pebbles clattering against each other into a regular string of notes, going up and down at a regular pulse (although nature does have a way of making these pulsed events happen – a tree swinging in the wind, or waves breaking on the shore are pulsed events, for instance). The percussive nature of the clanking stones is imitated by the percussive nature of the piano. Nothing in the stimulus, however, explains the pitch ascriptions as triads. The triads belong to a different domain of meaning that has nothing directly to do with the sound of the brook. Were the brook to be menacing rather than peaceful, more dissonant intervals could easily have been selected than the consonant thirds and fourths of an arpeggio.

Interestingly, the trout motive is just that: an arpeggio, very similar to the brook’s arpeggio (see Fig 3.c in particular).

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<sup>16</sup> Franz Schubert, *First Vocal Album for Low Voice* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1923), 6.

**Fig. 3** The different “trout” gestures (piano part only)<sup>17</sup>:

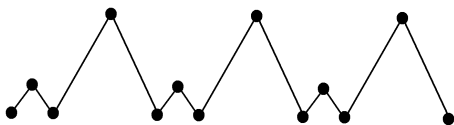
3. a. measure 1	3. b. measure 172	3. c. measure 6
Semi-scalar <sup>18</sup> rising gesture		triadic rising gesture
in the left hand (lower register)	in the right hand (upper register)	
		

In this “trout” gesture, the rising half is played a little faster and the second half truncated and slower. As Adam is made from the earth, the trout is made from the brook and that ancestry shows in her having preserved half of the arpeggio. In the piano accompaniment, the alternation of the two notes (a third apart) at the top of the arpeggio gesture create a bobbing effect. This echoes the rocking accompaniment of quarter notes placed on eighth note offbeats, found in the accompaniment (Fig. 3.a, right hand) and which also characterized the brook (Fig. 2, left hand). All these characteristics appear in our others pieces: a fast gesture, a high register, and this idea of bobbing, or alternation (particularly evident in the transition at the end of the first stanza, mm. 26-29).

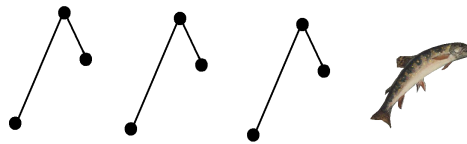
While the brook is continuous (eternal), the trout’s gesture is a series of spasms.

**Fig. 4:** A comparison of the “brook” and “trout” gestures<sup>19</sup>

a. the brook



b. the trout



<sup>17</sup> Franz Schubert, *Die Forelle*, ed. Walther Dürr (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1975), 20-23.

<sup>18</sup> This gesture is also essentially an arpeggio, G<sup>b</sup> and G<sup>♯</sup> being passing tones.

<sup>19</sup> Winslow Homer, “Leaping trout,” (1893), from <<http://www.mfa.org/zoom.asp?file=SC73661.jpg>>, accessed December 11, 2006.

What about the gesture, the direction, the rhythm of the trout's arpeggio? Since we have fish (justifiably) on our minds, we could imagine a fish darting up-current, and then for a moment being dragged downstream a little before darting up again. A different interpretation might view this gesture as a leap out of the water (Fig 4.b). But this isn't as convincing. Why would there be this incessant leaping throughout the piece? We don't need to be literalists about it: just because this "leaping" arpeggio occurs seventy times throughout the song doesn't mean that the fish we are depicting has leapt seventy times in the space of three minutes. After all, the first stanza, which describes the narrator observing the fish, could have lasted an hour.

The leaping gestures that occur *after* the fish has been caught (from measure 43 to the end of the song) are particularly interesting. Do these leaps take place in the narrator's imagination? In the listener's imagination? Are they a reminiscence? The whole story is told in the past tense, so all this leaping wasn't in the present in the first place; each of these seventy leaps took place in the past. It remains that these post-mortem leaps have a different affect than the previous ones. Looking at the score, we see that they are the same notes, same rhythms, same slurs, same accents as before (and Schubert doesn't notate anything else), yet narratively, they must now represent something different (the trout's agony perhaps). For the listener, while the arpeggios were joyful at the beginning of the piece, there's now something melancholic about them. Something has been broken, something has been lost, irrevocably. And this is entirely due to the lyrics, to the story.

At about the midpoint in Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf*, the duck is eaten up by the wolf. Yet, *after* the duck is eaten, there's one last statement by the oboe (the instrument that represents the duck). The narrator rationalizes this by explaining that, in

his haste, the wolf had swallowed the duck whole, and that the duck was still alive in the wolf's stomach (so maybe the duck is all right... then again, that's the last we hear from the duck in the piece). This is a generally unsatisfactory explanation. This dead duck speaking mournfully beyond the grave (or, as the case may be, beyond the wolf's stomach), much like the Commander in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, is casting a fatal spell on the wolf, and thus, in a formal sense, launching the entire second part of the piece where Peter finally captures the wolf. Those last accents of the dead trout have, if not the same function (since the song ends), the same affect. They speak of merry leaps not taken.

Objectively speaking, there is nothing particularly trout-like about this motive. If we look at it simply in terms of outline, in terms of gesture, then it's the brother of this other well-know motive<sup>20</sup> (Fig 5):

**Fig. 5:** A transcription of Woody Woodpecker's famous cry:<sup>21</sup>



It's the same idea, this time used to portray a woodpecker. The two are somewhat similar in mood, but what are the differences? The color is different: on the one hand, we have an elegant piano passage, and on the other, we have the falsetto of voice actor Mel Blanc trying and succeeding to sound like a rather annoying cartoon character. Therefore the piano, with its pearly sound contributes an appropriate color to the fish effect. The piano isn't specifically necessary. The trout motive would sound just as effective and

<sup>20</sup> I also find that it isn't entirely unrelated to Strauss's Till Eulenspiegel motive.

<sup>21</sup> Transcribed from sound file: <<http://frogstar.soylentgeek.com/wav/woody2.wav>>, accessed December 11, 2006.

fish-like on a harp, or a violin (as shown by Schubert himself in his quintet). However, were we to give that gesture to a wind instrument, the resulting effect would probably be more reminiscent of Woody Woodpecker.

Were we to say that the shape of the gesture certainly has something fish-like about it, would we mean that the melodic line evokes an actual shape? Does that shape pretend to mirror the contour of a fish's profile, as Fig. 4.b suggests? The gesture is happy, perhaps due to the major key but mostly to its upward direction, and its high register. What makes happiness particularly fish-like? Fish do not smile, much to the contrary! For our narrator, the fish's activity and apparent excitement is a testimony to its happiness; we did speak earlier of "merry leaps" and the poem does speak of "merry haste."

The high register evokes many different possible visual sources: the glistening, shimmering skin of the fish, the rippling water, the sound of wavelets, the fluidity of the fish's motion, the lightness, the buoyancy of the fish in the water. The accent that Schubert indicates at the top of the gesture could be interpreted as a sudden and intense shimmer, like the sun being reflected in a mirror. Unlike other fish pieces that aren't songs, and that therefore only have a title to suggest the fish aspect, this one has the fish embedded within the music, as part of the words that make up the vocal line. The title constitutes a form of "cheating," as we have seen from our Woody Woodpecker example. Were we to replace the title, and name the song "The Woodpecker" instead of "The Trout," and change the words of the song to conform to a new, woodpecker-related narrative, but keeping the melody in the piano line intact, it would no longer be a piece about a fish. It would be a piece about a woodpecker, and every listener would be keen to

read every note as referring somehow to the woodpecker, or to some other aspect of the woodpecker's adventures.

Agreed, this substitution would likely be unsuccessful. Woody Woodpecker's signature taunt or cry-of-triumph has two parts (see again Fig. 5): first the three laughs that are reminiscent of the trout gesture, *then* a quick laugh on one repeated note (doubled by a percussion instrument). It is only that second part which is genuinely reminiscent of a woodpecker and its pecking rhythm. In other words, for Schubert, as well as for anyone before the advent of Woody Woodpecker, if the piano arpeggio is not be immediately recognizable as depicting a fish, let alone a trout, it can be easily connected with a fish gesture (say, the leap), whereas it is much harder to construe it as having anything to do with a woodpecker.

That this particular gesture would be Woody Woodpecker's cry is enlightening though: it's a smile, a laugh, a cry of triumph. Why does it have that affect? Perhaps because a major chord is what comes out naturally from a bugle, and bugles are used in military settings, usually to arouse, energize the soldier listener.<sup>22</sup>

The idea of the laugh can take us in a completely different direction. Indeed, didn't we make it clear earlier that this is a bawdy poem? So this gesture could have less to do with the trout than with the giggling of the audience, perhaps an ancestor of the laugh-box so popular in television comedies from the fifties onward. In that case, the post-mortem utterances of the theme have the function of keeping us with the proper outlook – not to feel sorry for this trout-that-isn't-a-trout, but to be amused by the

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<sup>22</sup> The slow outlining of arpeggios can yield calmer or more mournful music, such as "Taps," but anything faster will be more uplifting.

innuendos, and to have a good collective chuckle as a group of males, on the side of the initiates.

The arpeggio is not the only musical element in this piece which is descriptive of the trout. Take the melody (the vocal line) with its staccato leap at the beginning (mm. 5-25) which gets reiterated throughout the melody. This periodic upward poking out and up of the melody could be perceived as somewhat sudden. Because it is high in the vocal register, the singer cannot do otherwise than to sing it loudly, creating sudden dynamic swells in the melody. The composer, in his need to describe the animal, integrates an animal rhythm, an animal gesture. This animal element in the song constitutes a stretch, a disruption, a transgression, in the otherwise human flow of the music. Or, seen differently, the integration of the trout causes an opening into new, heretofore uncharted musical possibilities.

A few last comments about *Die Forelle* before we move on to another piece. Schubert used this lied as the basis of a much longer work, a piano quintet. The trout melody and its characteristic accompaniments reappear in the penultimate movement as a set of variations. Schubert probably expected his audience to be familiar with the lied, and much of the music (in all the movements of the quintet) still bears a close connection to motives from the song. Thus, the quintet still constitutes “fish music,” but the elimination of the words represents a notable alteration. Does Schubert’s poem and the plot surrounding the trout, the onlooker and the fisherman, remain the focus of the listener’s imagination during the seven minutes that the variations movement lasts, or even the half an hour that the piece takes? Schubert retains the melodic theme (same intervals, same rhythms), but modifies everything else (e.g. tempo, accompanying

texture). Were the words to remain engraved in our memory throughout these countless iterations, the changes in the music would still supposedly provide a constantly shifting shading on the matter: lyrical, playful, light, solemn, carnival-like. The reduction of the text, from a situation where an entire poem is weaved into the music, to that where it subsists only as one word, a mere reference in a subtitle, considerably widens the realm of what is implied and what the audience is justifiably allowed to perceive. While in the song, the audience's thought is more tightly controlled by the words, the quintet is involved in a large-scale commentary on the poem; it becomes a backdrop to musings and inspires a variety of interpretations. At the end of the fourth movement (the variation set), there is both a triumph and a defeat of the theme: a triumph because it has been able to lend itself to many different changes, a defeat because, at the end of the movement, the listener can no longer take any more: the theme is entirely spent. With these variations, the trout undergoes a certain form of abuse, leading way to potential accusations of repeated torture or rape.

While Schubert does condescend to insert clear fish characteristics in his depiction of the trout, the figure of the trout seems, on different levels, to be one, the substance, the nature of which is "filled," provided, by the narrator, by the onlooker. This "hollow" role for the trout finds its seed in the dichotomous morals of Schubart's poem, continues in the polysemous nature of the trout motive (is it leaping? swimming? shimmering? wiggling? seducing? laughing? and *who* is doing this? the trout? the fisherman? the implied audience?), a feature that is partly inherent to the nature of music itself, and finds its apotheosis in the development of the trout's song, ruthlessly casting it in manifold guises, in the context of a set of variations, itself encased within other, more

remotely related movements. The trout here is but an excuse, an empty receptacle which may contain anything one wishes to place in it.

Gustav Mahler gives us another example of a “fish song” with “Des Antonius von Padua Pischpredigt.” It is similar to Schubert’s “trout” in that, once again, the fish stand for humans. Mahler derived the text (see Appendix C), from that of the seventeenth century Austrian friar Abraham a Sancta Clara. Again, the allegorical nature of the text is quite evident in the detailed description of the character of the fish. Particularly entertaining is the idea of an aristocracy within the fish, based on which is most prized by humans as food – an odd claim to nobility, that again betrays a perfectly human-centered outlook.

Anthony preaches to the fish. The fish listen carefully, but once the sermon is over, it is immediately forgotten. It is not that the animals fail to understand the sermon – otherwise why would it “so please the fish”? Unless it something else about the sermon that pleased the fish? Perhaps the fact that a human came to talk to them. Or the fact that it was Anthony of Padua, an important religious and historical figure. Perhaps the fish were attracted to the musicality, the form of the sermon, rather than its substance? Or simply, they understood everything about it but, because they’re animals, they simply forgot the sermon. This would echo Nietzsche’s questioning of the happy cow, and the cow having forgotten her response before being able to deliver it.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps humans who observe fish detect a sort of aimlessness and this is probably what will have prompted

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<sup>23</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 61. (Reader)

images such as the forgetful fish, as recently as in the character of Dory in the film *Finding Nemo*.<sup>24</sup>

The text also appears to establish a parallel between the relationship of God to humans and the relationship of humans to animals. Humans would similarly fail to remember what God would have to tell them, and return to the behaviors they are naturally predestined (or prone) to have.

Like Schubert, Mahler would later take this fish song, and incorporate it in the middle of a more serious, traditional form, the third movement of his second symphony. As this isn't the only time Schubert or Mahler resort to this process, we cannot assume that there's anything compelling about fish songs in particular that would prompt their reuse. Throughout his work, Mahler has his ear to the animal world. This tendency should be probably be understood as belonging to an overarching interest in the pastoral, within the Austro-German artistic unconscious.

Just as Schubert did, Mahler looked for a way of depicting the fish in Abraham a Sancta Clara's story, and resorted to the visual:

**Fig. 6:** Gustav Mahler, Symphony No. 2, Mvt. 3, mm.12-18.<sup>25</sup> (Strings only)

*Sehr gemächlich. Nicht eilen.*

1. Viol.  
2. Viol.  
Viola  
Cello  
Bass

*p*  
*pizz.*  
*p*  
*pizz.*  
*p*

*Sehr gemächlich. Nicht eilen.*  
*Very leisurely. Not fast.*

<sup>24</sup> While science has now disproved this, folklore has it that fish have very short memories.

<sup>25</sup> Gustav Mahler, *Symphonies 1 and 2 in Full Score* (New York: Dover Editions, 1987), 248.

As in the Schubert, the register is also high, but it does go lower, probably to evoke all types of fish. And this time, the composer uses wind instruments.<sup>26</sup> The violins play a regular string of sixteenth notes over a waltz accompaniment. The melody is slower (“Nicht eilen” versus Schubert’s “Etwas geschwind”), fainter (not because of dynamics, since Schubert never exceeds a *piano*, but more likely because of the less defined timbre and “attack” of the violins by contrast with that of the piano), with fewer syncopations, fewer accents (those are still present in our example, as evidenced by the grace note in m. 15 and the accents at the beginnings of mm. 17 and 18, but they are subtler). These differences might constitute the acknowledgment of a certain emotional distance, which wasn’t so pronounced in the Schubert. Mahler composes an infinitely cycling figure (more akin to that of Schubert’s brook than to the trout’s discontinuous gesture), which evokes the calm activity of the dozens of fish listening to Anthony. The endless repetition lends itself to the “fade out” effect that closes the piece, similar to the device used by Schubert at the end of “Die Forelle” (the fleeting fish are prone to vanishing). It also portrays a consciousness that is perhaps fickle and fleeting like the memories of the sermon.

Before concluding, let’s contrast Mahler and Schubert’s songs with another fish piece that is neither a song (nor is it based on a song). It isn’t even particularly songful: Camille Saint-Saëns’s “Aquarium,” from his *Carnaval des Animaux*.

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<sup>26</sup> Albeit clarinet and flutes in their middle register: a smooth, non-human (and non-bird-like) timbre. I am wondering whether my issue with the use of wind instruments to depict fish is that they require air. If we accept this reservation, we can more easily say that Mahler’s use of the winds grounds the fish narrative solidly into the human domain.

Fig. 7: Saint-Saëns, “Aquarium,” mm. 1-2.<sup>27</sup>

**N° 7** **Aquarium**

**Andantino**

FLÛTE *pp*

HARMONICA *pp*

1<sup>er</sup> PIANO *pp una corda sf*

2<sup>d</sup> PIANO *una corda pp sf*

1<sup>er</sup> VIOLON **Andantino** Sourdine [mute]

2<sup>d</sup> VIOLON Sourdine

ALTO Sourdine

VIOLONCELLE *p*

Interestingly, the title is not “Fish,” but “Aquarium,” which is unlike the other pieces in Saint-Saëns’s set. Indeed, all of the other movement titles<sup>28</sup> refer to a specific animal, with one exception: “The Aviary,” which again refers to the object (or structure) that contains the animals.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps this is connected to our ability (and tendency) not to think of birds and fish as specific animals (i.e. the carp, the pigeon),<sup>30</sup> by contrast with the lion or the kangaroo, which we would never think of including in an overarching “mammal” category, because they are, like us, terrestrial creatures, which overlap with

<sup>27</sup> “Aquarium” from Camille Saint-Saëns, *The Carnival of the Animals* (Mineola: Dover, 1999), 17.

<sup>28</sup> Titles of the other movements: 1. Introduction and the Lion’s Royal March; 2. Hens and Roosters; 3. Wild Asses; 4. Tortoises; 5. The Elephant; 6. Kangaroos; 7. Aquarium; 8. Characters with long ears; 9. The Cuckoo in the deep woods; 10. Aviary; 11. Pianists; 12. Fossils, 13. The Swan; 14. Finale.

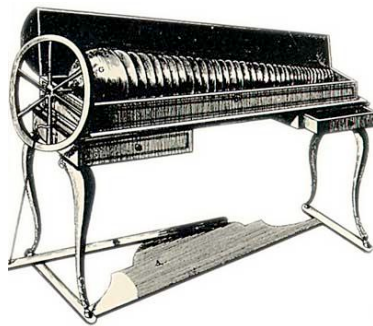
<sup>29</sup> The titles “Aquarium” and “The Aviary” are the two only metonymies, “Characters with long ears” (mvt. 8) being a synecdoche (long ears are actually a “component” of the donkey). Arguably, the movement’s purpose might extend beyond the literal, and be figuratively used to mean “ânes” (dunces). “Fossils” is also used in both a literal and figurative sense.

<sup>30</sup> Granted, there is a cuckoo movement; maybe we do distinguish between birds, after all! And Abraham a Sancta Clara appears well aware of the different habit and behaviors of a large variety of fish.

our world. Besides being indirect, the term “aquarium,” has a much more recent, modern term feel than “volière.”<sup>31</sup> This unadulterated Latin import evokes something scientific.

To the listener, the most striking aspect of this piece is arguably the “temperature”: the instrumentation, register and texture give it a cold, glassy feel. It is remarkable that a composer as conservative as Saint-Saëns, a man who famously revolted against what he was hearing on the opening night of Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*, would write a piece that involves such a completely unusual instrument as the glass harmonica<sup>32</sup> (or armonica) (Fig 8).

**Fig. 8:** A glass harmonica<sup>33</sup>



According to Alec King, “The heyday of the armonica in Europe lasted until about 1830,”<sup>34</sup> thus in 1886, when this piece was premiered, the glass harmonica had been out of fashion for more than half a century. Yet Saint-Saëns resurrected it specifically for his “Aquarium” movement.

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<sup>31</sup> The word “aquarium” starts appearing in French starting in the 1860s.

<sup>32</sup> “The glass harmonica consists of a set of tuned glass bowls that are rotated by a treadle and sounded by stroking the wetted rims with the fingers, producing a pure singing tone of striking, almost vocal quality. *Grove* lists glockenspiel as a modern replacement for this rare instrument.” (Note from Camille Saint-Saëns, *The Carnival of the Animals* (Mineola: Dover, 1999), v.) “[Benjamin Franklin] took the bowls of the glasses and fitted them concentrically (the largest on the left) on a horizontal rod, which was actuated by a crank attached to a pedal. ... In a slightly later development of the armonica, the rims of the glasses (at least for half the length of the spindle) were moistened automatically by means of a shallow trough of water through which they could pass as the spindle revolved.” (Alec Hyatt King: “Musical glasses,” *Grove Music Online*, ed. L. Macy, <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>, accessed December 9, 2006.)

<sup>33</sup> From <<http://www.ushistory.org/franklin/temple/images/armonicabig.jpg>>, accessed December 9, 2006.

<sup>34</sup> Alec Hyatt King: “Musical glasses,” *Grove Music Online*, ed. L. Macy, <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>, accessed December 9, 2006.

For this piece, perhaps even more fascinating than the instrumentation, a case could be made for a synesthetic translation that doesn't involve vision, smell, or taste, but, precisely, one of the senses that a 19<sup>th</sup> century composer would not have listed: balance. A particular type of aimlessness is instituted, which can be analyzed in the music. It has to do with shifting, uncertain harmony.<sup>35</sup> Saint-Saëns's use of harmony demonstrates that he is entering to some degree into the experience of being a fish, in the water, with no ground, only shifting currents.

Saint-Saëns believed that the publication of *Carnival of the Animals* would ruin his career.<sup>36</sup> He authorized its posthumous publication, and it is now, ironically, his most famous piece. Looking through the work, we find countless more places where Saint-Saëns stretched beyond what was appropriate. For instance, in the middle of all the animals, he lists fossils (in that movement, he quotes from his own *Danse Macabre*), he also depicts pianists slaving over scales. Appropriately, the piece was written not for a concert, but for a Mardi-Gras evening with some of his musician friends.<sup>37</sup> The work is something that the general atmosphere of carnival would excuse, would render appropriate. Carnival is a time when it is appropriate not only to wear the dress of humans from other branches of society, from other genders, from other times, but also, evidently, to try out entirely non-human clothes.

It is interesting to note that the three pieces studied so far rely on humor: while the Schubert is bawdy, the Mahler is satirical, and the Saint-Saëns is carnivalesque. This comic role in connection with the fish appears to disappear for more recent music. Fish

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<sup>35</sup> For instance, the use of the French augmented sixth chords resolving directly to i, or the complementary use of iv (m. 2) then IV (m. 4).

<sup>36</sup> Camille Saint-Saëns, *The Carnival of the Animals* (Mineola: Dover, 1999), viii.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, v.

pieces such as Claude Debussy's "Poissons d'or" (from *Images*, 1907), or Benjamin Britten's song "Fish in the unruffled lakes" (1937), are serious (albeit without being heavy). A study of these or other fish pieces would likely yield more information. With the Britten, we could investigate how the nature of the figure of the fish in W. H. Auden's text compares to those of fish in the Sancta Clara and Schubart texts. Why does Britten evoke "fish" in the accompaniment throughout the whole song, even when fish is no longer evoked in the text? How are fish and birds, as creatures from a different universe than humans depicted as interchangeable?

Likewise, the Debussy demonstrates a new sensibility. After Saint-Saëns's more "Jules Verne" approach, where we pluck the fish out of the ocean, place it in a glass display case in order to get a cold and scientific look at the mesmerizing creature, Debussy arguably takes us to the depths of a pond – there's a warmer texture in his piece (due to the use of the lower register, and the pedal) which may echo the dark background of the Japanese painting which inspired him to write. This is not the dead, utilitarian fish that a Chardin might paint, it is not a fairytale fish, and it is not a naturalist's or a zoologist's fish. Debussy enters the waters, as it were, and gives the movements of the fish a *goal*, which (and this is perfectly remarkable since the converse is usually true) the other composers do not: Schubert with the never-ending strophes of his song, the never-ending variations, and the image of the trout that survives its own death,<sup>38</sup> Mahler with his endless texture of swimming fish, and Saint-Saëns with his very distant, glassy look onto the subject. In those three pieces, the fish never have a will, they just pulse, endlessly, in a mechanistic way. Debussy imbues his fish with desire, with goal. Yet we have no reason to believe that there's anything human about his fish, which is, again,

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<sup>38</sup> Echoing perhaps Hegel's assertion that the animal cannot die?

unlike both the Schubert and the Mahler. Thus we may be permitted to see a historical evolution from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century (Schubert), where a fish is nothing else than an image, to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Saint-Saëns), with its fascination with all that fish represent scientifically, but also where fish are subjected to a sort of external, colonial, domineering outlook, until finally we arrive at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, where Debussy truly starts to imagine himself as a fish.

In their handling of the fish subject, composers, like writers, unconsciously express their views on the nature of the animal. The particular case of the fish requires the synesthetic jump, demands that composers and listeners in turn open their minds to more indirect associations, be those sensory, intellectual or affective, that have to do with fish. Our understanding is always based on ourselves. We go from a place of complete negation of the other (e.g. the woman, the child, the animal), to a place where we succeed in accepting, in our imagination, bodily and sensory metamorphoses. While this understanding remains irrevocably anchored in a human consciousness and it can never become anything else than an anthropomorphic understanding of the other, poetry, music, art find devices that extract us temporarily from our bodily vessels. Surrendering our logical minds willingly to those poetic avenues, we approach a place of transcendence, we discover the external place held by the animal, and this gives us, in turn, a new understanding of ourselves and of our place in the universe.

## APPENDIX A – “Die Forelle,” text by Christian Schubart

Die Forelle

*The Trout*

In einem Bächlein helle,  
Da schoß in froher Eil  
Die launische Forelle  
Vorüber wie ein Pfeil.

*In a bright little brook  
there shot in merry haste  
a capricious trout:  
past it shot like an arrow.*

Ich stand an dem Gestade  
Und sah in süßer Ruh  
Des muntern Fischleins Bade  
Im klaren Bächlein zu.

*I stood upon the shore  
and watched in sweet peace  
the cheery fish's bath  
in the clear little brook.*

Ein Fischer mit der Rute  
Wohl an dem Ufer stand,  
Und sah's mit kaltem Blute,  
Wie sich das Fischlein wand.

*A fisherman with his rod  
stood at the water-side,  
and watched with cold blood  
as the fish swam about.*

So lang dem Wasser Helle,  
So dacht ich, nicht gebricht,  
So fängt er die Forelle  
Mit seiner Angel nicht.

*So long as the clearness of the water  
remained intact, I thought,  
he would not be able to capture the trout  
with his fishing rod.*

Doch endlich ward dem Diebe  
Die Zeit zu lang. Er macht  
Das Bächlein tückisch trübe,  
Und eh ich es gedacht,

*But finally the thief grew weary  
of waiting. He stirred up  
the brook and made it muddy,  
and before I realized it,*

So zuckte seine Rute,  
Das Fischlein zappelt dran,  
Und ich mit regem Blute  
Sah die Betrogene an.

*his fishing rod was twitching:  
the fish was squirming there,  
and with raging blood I  
gazed at the betrayed fish.*

Die ihr am goldenen Quelle  
Der sicheren Jugend weilt,  
Denkt doch an die Forelle,  
Seht ihr Gefahr, so eilt!

*At the golden fountain  
of youth, you linger so confidently;  
But think of the trout,  
and if you see danger, flee!*

Meist fehlt ihr nur aus Mangel  
der Klugheit, Mädchen, seht  
Verführer mit der Angel!  
Sonst blutet ihr zu spät!

*Mostly it is from lack  
of cleverness that maidens  
miss the angling seducers.  
So beware! otherwise you may bleed too late!*

English translation by Adnan Kazazic (modified)  
from <<http://www.hitech-solutions.com/Trout/Schubert.htm>>,  
accessed December 11, 2006.

**APPENDIX B – “Die Forelle,” Lied by Franz Schubert**

[SCORE NOT INCLUDED IN THE PDF VERSION]

[SCORE NOT INCLUDED IN THE PDF VERSION]

[SCORE NOT INCLUDED IN THE PDF VERSION]

Franz Schubert, *Die Forelle*, ed. Walther Dürr (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1975), 20-23.

**APPENDIX C – “Des Antonius von Padua Fischpredigt,” Text by Gustav Mahler  
after Abraham a Sancta Clara.**

Des Antonius von Padua Fischpredigt

*St. Anthony of Padua’s Sermon to the Fish*

Antonius zur Predigt  
die Kirche find’t ledig!  
Er geht zu den Flüssen  
und predigt den Fischen!  
Sie schlag’n mit den Schwänzen!  
Im Sonnenschein glänzen, sie glänzen.

*At sermon time Anthony  
finds the church empty!  
He goes to the rivers  
and preaches to the fish!  
They flap with their tails!  
They gleam in the sunshine, they gleam.*

Die Karpfen mit Rogen  
sind all hierher zogen;  
hab’n d’Mäuler aufrissen,  
sich Zuhör’n’s beflissen.  
Kein Predigt niemalen  
den Fischen so g’fallen!

*The carp with roe  
have all congregated;  
their jaws gaping,  
intent on listening.  
Never did a sermon  
so please the fish!*

Spitzgoschete Hechte,  
die immerzu fechten,  
sind eilends herschwommen,  
zu hören den Frommen!  
Auch jene Phantasten,  
die immerzu fasten,  
die Stockfisch ich meine,  
zur Predigt erscheinen!  
Kein Predigt niemalen  
den Stockfisch so g’fallen!

*Sharp-snouted pike,  
that fence continually,  
swam up in a hurry  
to hear the holy man!  
Even those odd creatures  
that continually fast:  
I mean the codfish,  
appear for the sermon!  
Never did a sermon  
so please the codfish!*

Gut’ Aale und Hausen,  
die Vornehme schmausen,  
die selbst sich bequemen,  
die Predigt vernehmen.  
Auch Krebse, Schildkroten,  
sonst langsame Boten,  
steigen eilig vom Grund,  
zu hören diesen Mund!  
Kein Predigt niemalen  
den Krebsen so g’fallen!

*Good eels and sturgeon  
that people of quality relish,  
even they condescend  
to attend the sermon.  
Crabs, too, and turtles,  
usually slowboats,  
climb hurriedly from the depths  
to hear this voice!  
Never did a sermon  
so please the crabs!*

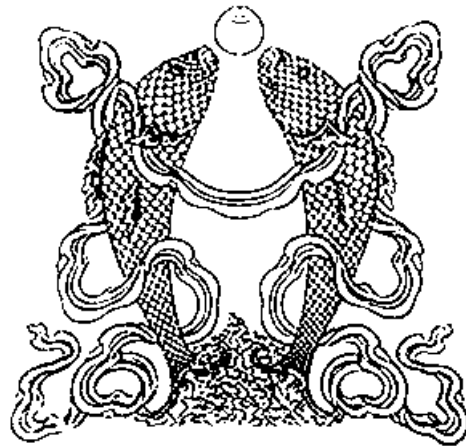
Fisch' große, Fisch' kleine!  
Vornehm' und gemeine!  
Erheben die Köpfe  
wie verständ'ge Geschöpfe!  
Auf Gottes Begehren  
Die Predigt anhören!

*Fish big and fish small!  
Of quality and common!  
They raise their heads  
like rational creatures!  
At God's command  
they listen to the sermon.*

Die Predigt geendet,  
ein Jeder sich wendet!  
Die Hechte bleiben Diebe,  
die Aale viel lieben,  
die Predigt hat g'fallen,  
sie bleiben wie Allen!  
Die Krebs' geh'n zurücke,  
die Stockfisch' bleib'n dicke,  
die Karpfen viel fressen  
die Predigt vergessen!  
Die Predigt hat g'fallen,  
sie bleiben wie Allen!

*The sermon finished,  
each one turns away!  
The pike remain thieves,  
the eels great lovers,  
the sermon was pleasing,  
they all stay the same!  
The crabs go backwards,  
the codfish stay fat,  
the carp gorge a lot,  
the sermon 's forgotten!  
The sermon was pleasing,  
they all stay the same!*

English translation by Renate Voit-Stark and Thomas Hampson.  
From <<http://www.hampsong.com/library/lyrics.php?id=P536>>  
accessed December 11, 2006.



(Illustration from <<http://www.alexandra-david-neel.org/images/dn150.jpg>>, accessed December 11, 2006)