

Marcia Menter

Futile Serenade

Vergebliches Ständchen, Opus 84 No.5 of Brahms

‘So cold is the night, so icy the wind—
My heart will freeze,’ cries the boy in the song.
‘My treasure, my child—let me in!’
She locks her door, since much depends
on her retaining her innocence.

‘Let your heart freeze,’ comes the maid’s reply.
‘If your love starts dying, well—let it die!’
Innocent though this poppet may be,
she doesn’t believe a word he’s said
and sends him home to a narrow bed.

When I was as young as the girl in the song,
I thought it an insubstantial thing
(though the words were infernally tricky to sing).
But I grew up in a wintry place—
I knew that door, that wind, that ice.

Something—not some wheedling boy—
was drawing near in the dark of night;
I conjured the sound of a nameless voice
crying through the roar of the wind:
‘Open the door! Let me in, *let me in!*’

Even then, I knew that I
must lose my innocence to that cry.