

The Erlking: The Story Behind the Title

As I began work on the second book in my Mick Chandra mystery series, I knew that Mick and his partner, Elizabeth Chang, would be seconded to New Scotland Yard's Pedophile Unit to aid in the investigation of a notorious north London-based pedophile ring — a ring that would be headed by someone who refers to himself as? And here I was stuck.

I was six weeks into the writing of the book when the title of a poem by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's popped into my head. I promptly removed a 1957 edition of the *Penguin Book of German Verse* from my bookshelf, read "Erlkönig" both in German and English, and yelled, "Eureka!", scaring the hell out of the cat.

Long considered Germany's national poet, Goethe (1749-1832) is still regarded by some as the greatest poet in the German language. In his poem, the Erlking is an evil troll who kidnaps children. In his thrall, these children die. Interpreters of the poem typically assume that the text reflects the high infant mortality rate in Germany at the time it was written, and that the Erlking is a portent of death. However, others (including me) believe the evil troll is a symbol of child abuse and eventual death thereof. Lines like *Ich liebe dich, mich reizt deine schone Gestalt* (I love you, your beautiful shape excites me) make it easy to see why I believe Goethe was writing about something other than mortal childhood illness.

Goethe's poem has also been used as the text for Lieder — a song for voice and piano based on a German-language poem and performed in concert or recital hall — by several composers. The best known of these Lieder is Franz Schubert's "Erlkönig" which he wrote in 1815. He revised the song three times before publishing his fourth version in 1821 as his "Opus 1." Though he died young, Schubert managed to compose some 600 Lieder, many of which are regarded as some of the finest pieces in the classical lexicon for voice and piano. Among these 600, "Erlkönig" is widely considered the best of the best.

Schubert's song is a challenge for both singer and accompanist. He virtually tortures the pianist by incorporating an "ostinato" (a repetitive musical and rhythmic pattern in a given composition — think Ravel's "Bolero," and its persistent underlying rhythmic motive) for not one, but both hands. In terms of endurance, ostinati in both hands takes considerable strength on the part of the pianist. As a pianist who has performed Schubert's "Erlkönig" many times over

the years, all I can say is, "Be pumped!"

In Chapter Two of *The Erlking*, Mick's lover, Jess (an American expat and renowned concert pianist), demonstrates the thunderous ostinato technique incorporated into Schubert's musical rendition of Goethe's poem as she simultaneously quotes the text. The German poet's words send shivers down Mick's spine:

Und bist du nicht willig, so brauch' ich Gewalt (And if you won't come willingly, I will use force).

.....*das Kind war tot* (the child was dead). Thus reads the final line of Goethe's dark verse.

But if the determined Detective Inspector Mick Chandra has anything to do with it, the Erlking will soon be stymied from abusing and murdering any more children. After all, Mick wouldn't blink at re-writing Goethe.