What are the advantages of making an Harmonic Analysis in Verse Form?

It clarifies:

1. How each harmonic unit is arranged and how this arrangement corresponds with the poetry’s structure – the poetry’s rhythms and cadences at each level within this structure (line, couplet, verse, etc.), as well as how the harmony corresponds with the poetry’s meaning – by accompanying specific words with expressive “word setting”, by mimicking the rhythm of declamation suggested by the poetry (speed of words and the units of thought) and by paralleling the rise and fall of emotion as suggested by the poetry with the increase and decrease of harmonic tension and activity. (This latter is usually also paralleled – particularly in music of the Romantic period – by the literal “rise and fall” of the melodic line, but this aspect is shown more clearly by the contrapuntal analysis).

2. What type of harmonic unit is used: I/V or I/ IV exchanges or ii V I progressions (i.e. cycle of 5ths movement) and how they are distributed throughout the structure.

3. How these harmonic units are proportioned within the rhythmic line: how many beats or measures each harmony occupies; how these are placed – on weak or strong beats, within weak or strong measures; the weight of each of these chords in the entire progression (i.e. the harmonic rhythm).

4. What the chords in these progressions are – are they primarily diatonic or chromatic harmonies; do they consist of 3 notes, 4 notes, 5 notes (i.e. increasingly more dense and, hence, more complex, tension-filled sonorities); do they use tritones, if so where, how frequently and to what purpose; are the chords, perhaps, generated as resultants of strong contrapuntal movement – and not vice-versa.*

5. How these chords relate to the melody.**

6. What kind of cadences are used to parallel the poetic cadence: do they “close” the progression (i.e. harmonically do they indicate a completed thought (PAC) or do they indicate a continuing thought (half cadences, deceptive cadences – i.e. differing types of “harmonic punctuations”).

7. How the overall modulation pattern – the different keys used as the work progresses, etc. - ties the successive poetic couplets into a larger harmonic structure (i.e. makes the entire work a single harmonic progression which - thanks to these key changes - accurately reflects the hierarchy between the couplets and, at the same time, suggests the different emotions and thoughts conveyed in each poetic couplet.

8. Where sequences and returning harmonic patterns are used.

In later musical examples (Schumann, Wolf, Wagner), these analyses clarify:

9. The variety of chromatic chords which can be used to give a sense of harmonic movement while prolonging one single chord function (a “ii” or “V” chord function, for example). This enables a “ii V I” progression (a 3 or 4 chord progression in the Classic period) to be expressed by many more chords (various chromatic “gradations” or “flavors” of the ii or the V chord – i.e. differing sonorities built over the 2nd and the 5th scale degree) and, consequently, allows this progression to extend over many more bars in the Romantic style.

10. How the harmonic progression often avoids the expected cadences – where, when and in what way the cadence is denied (a sort of “domino” like harmonic progression that, in the moment of resolution, instead, initiates a new progression.).

11. In general, how harmonies are exploited - as much for color, tension and atmosphere as for harmonic “function” within a progression – and how harmonic functions themselves are often exploited only to be denied at the last moment.

*This becomes clear with the increased difficulty of placing a simple chord symbol - letter or number - under the sonorities. In Bach chorales, given the beat by beat change of harmony, it is not difficult to distinguish non-chordal tones from chordal tones, but in more fluid harmonic and rhythmic situations, it can become difficult if one does not take the contrapuntal movement of the individual voices into account. In fact, it is in these situations where one becomes aware of how limited chord symbols are – be they letters or figures – when analyzing a contrapuntally generated music or, at least, a music which gives significant importance to the harmonic tensions generated by appoggiaturas, suspensions, retardations, etc. all those non-chordal tones used for delaying the appearance of a chord’s actual structure.

**How these chords actually relate to the melodic scale steps they harmonize is shown more easily by the contrapuntal analysis which clarifies the harmonic/melodic situation – i.e. is it a diatonic melody harmonized diatonically (Mozart “Voi che sapete”), Beethoven and Schubert “Kennst du das Land”), is it a diatonic melody harmonized chromatically (Schumann “Kennst du das Land”), is it a chromatic melody harmonized chromatically (Wolf “Kennst du das Land”). Here one recognizes which harmonies may be used to harmonize which scale degrees - a “given” for each harmonic style, but one which is under constant revision as that style matures.