

into every aspect of musical composition, and Johnson follows him along every highway and byway of the journey. It is a stunning achievement.

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### Discs 32–34

An image of Schubert was on my mind six years ago when I first encountered W.H. Auden's poem entitled 'The Composer', a portrait of an exemplary musician, an ideal figure based on no single historical life but composed of impressions gleaned from many. In it Auden imagines the composer as unique, a figure whose 'song is an absolute gift'. I thought of Schubert: 'Pour out your presence ... O imaginary song. You, alone ... are unable to say an existence is wrong ... pour out your forgiveness like wine.'<sup>1</sup>

In the Hyperion recordings (discs 32 to 34), Schubert offers important lessons as to how a composer should conduct himself. The standards he sets are hard and high, but they are the basis for the attainment of durable distinction in any life or art: honesty, courage and what T.S. Eliot called 'A condition of complete simplicity/(Costing not less than everything)'.<sup>2</sup>

Schubert's honesty, for example, is evident in his choice of Seidl's 'Sehnsucht' (disc 32; track 3), where he has set the following words: 'For many a day I have suffered because no song of mine has turned out well, because none can be forced to murmur freely, like the west wind'. His courage is evident in his embrace of solitude, both personal and intellectual when writing *Winterreise* (1827), one of the great masterworks of the vocal literature. This was at once an account of, a rejection of and a portrait of a typical figure who succumbed. In Schubert's setting there is a personal intensity, a sense that much is at stake, a recognition of his fate when he addresses the hurdy-gurdy player: 'Strange old man, shall I go with you? Will you turn your hurdy-gurdy to my songs?' (Disk 34, track 17)

In this recording (discs 33 and 34) the artistry of Matthias Goerne and Graham Johnson is extraordinary. Both musicians are in complete command of the performance, where a restrained approach to the text pays dividends in an affecting but never affected presentation of these songs. Goerne's perfectly even voice announces the beginning of an odyssey, where the portrayal of frozen feelings in 'Gefrorne Tränen' (disc 33; track 3) is mesmerizing. Such feelings return in 'Erstarrung' (disc 33; track 4) only for the wanderer to become again as dead, bordering almost on the catatonic. In a highly expressive interpretation of 'Der Lindenbaum' (disc 34; track 17) the dramatic aspect of the song is increased by the singer's highly controlled manner – a magisterial command which increases the intensity rather than obstructs it. Indeed in the *forte* repetitions of 'Wasserflut' (disc 33; track 6) Schubert comments on such restraint: 'And the soft snow melts away' (stanza 2); 'there will be my sweetheart's house' (fourth strophe). 'Auf dem Flusse' (disc 33; track 7) is an intellectual performance, cerebral in the best sense; indeed, this wanderer becomes a lost figure of man – the more so because of his intellectual capacity. Like Goethe's *Werther*, his tragic plight is augmented by his brilliance, and a similar sense of lost possibilities haunts us through this

<sup>1</sup> W. H. Auden, *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: The Modern Library, 2007), p. 181.

<sup>2</sup> T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, no. 4, 'Little Gidding'.

performance. Like Werther, Schubert's *Wanderer* begins his journey alone; we notice the continual reciprocity between him and the natural world around him. Yet inseparable from such natural communion is an intimation of danger, of an experiential energy so great that it threatens to overwhelm the expressive capacity and coherence of the self. Schubert has translated this daemonic impetus into musical form and the winter feelings which interrupt Müller's 'Frühlingstraum' (disc 33; track 11) are managed effortlessly here by both pianist and singer. The wanderer's inability to make compromises, to find some kind of sustaining balance between self and work means that he increasingly tries to make the world into his own image. This relationship of interior feelings to the outside world is marvellously brought to life in 'Einsamkeit' (disc 33; track 12). Such dreadful solipsism of the *Wanderer's* mentality blights his relationship to everything outside himself, whereby only those experiences are admissible that corroborate the self-image: this places *Winterreise*, like *Werther*, among the most intense psychological works of art ever written. What are we to make of such characters as Goethe's *Werther* and Schubert's *Wanderer*? The monstrosity of the uncompromising self is clear in this magnetic performance. Yet we can also hear the character of the protagonist as one that expresses a profound psychological dilemma: that of the acutely self-aware, self-reflective spirit, who is in quest of an integral, unifying experience.

The image of the dancer at one with the dance constantly recurs in nineteenth-century European literature as the palpable expression of a desperately longed-for, ontological wholeness, a wholeness also to be found in Goerne's fine performance of 'Irrlicht' (disc 33; track 9): it fits the singer like a glove. This wholeness contrasts brutally with the *Wanderer's* self-aware sense of having to live a fragmented and fragmenting life. As we follow his journey in *Winterreise*, Part Two (disc 34) we witness a pattern of disintegration and decline. In Goerne's and Johnson's masterly performance an almost speech-like element in Goerne's delivery of 'Der greise Kopf' (disc 34; track 7) intensifies Schubert's realization of this human drama. A suggestion of great depth modulates beautifully into a sense of being followed by a symbol of fate in 'Die Krähe' (disc 34; track 8). The fine dramatic contrasts by the singer in 'Letzte Hoffnung' (disc 34; track 9) never lose sight of the whole. In 'Im Dorfe' (disc 34; track 10) a grim picture of quotidian life, as viewed by a real outsider, is given a perfect interpretation by both singer and pianist. The sense of commitment in Johnson's playing is a revelation here. The drama of the piano introduction of 'Der stürmische Morgen' (disc 34; track 11) breaks into the mood of the previous song and leads the singer on to the joys of illusion and to an ultimate rejection: there is no room at the inn of death. A mysterious poem always brings out special depths in Schubert – one thinks of 'Der Doppelgänger' – and the mystery of 'Die Nebensonnen' (disc 34; track 16) is most exactly represented by singer and pianist, through their supreme control and restraint.

The cycle is a monologue and this displacing force of human self-consciousness is mirrored in the masterful musical economy of 'Der Leiermann' (disc 34; track 17), as the cycle culminates in tragic loss. Although he is a solipsistic figure, the *Wanderer's* life is not bereft of a social dimension. An intelligent, gifted, lively young man, like Goethe's *Werther*, unable to find either any social activity worthy of his talents or fulfilment in love, he ultimately identifies with a figure, 'no one wants to listen to nor look at'. Written a year before his death, the events of the cycle are scandalously close to real-life events. Schubert's own relationship to the

Wanderer is nothing if not ambiguous; and some of that ambiguity is transferred to us, as audience.

It is the 'simplicity' and truth of such statements (costing not less than everything) that makes Schubert such an irresistible song-composer, capable of lyric rapture and tragic meditation, as ironic as he is candid: Margaret Price captures this Schubertian duality in a single setting, 'Am Fenster' (disc 32; track 2), switching easily between loneliness and consolation, while Thomas Hampson's clear expression and avoidance of sentimentality adds a poignancy to the closing lines of 'Hippolits Lied' (disc 32; track 12). The expressive possibilities offered by Seidl's text 'Grab und Mond' (disc 32; track 14) are exploited to the full in Schubert's expert writing for men's voices, just as love and a Goethean renunciation are interwoven into the fabric of Schubert's delightful 'Serenade' D. 920 (disc 33; track 17), which closes with a Spinozian twist as the singer rather unexpectedly takes leave of the beloved. The wonderful impetus of Johnson's ever-sensitive accompaniment and Peter Schreier's masterful rendition underscores this duality in 'Lebensmut' (disc 32; track 5): 'How vigorously young life pulses through my mind and heart! I feel everything is glowing, aspiring; I feel pleasure and pain doubly. In vain I seek to restrain you, spirits of my quickened breast! You rule at will for sorrow or pleasure'.

Whether he liked it or not, Schubert could not avoid being caught up in the harsh realities of his plight and feeling bound to speak of them: 'Only will and delusion change; joy alternates with strife; the happiness of love flies past' ('Im Frühling': disc 32, track 5). Yet he never allowed any confessional impulse to divert him from his artistic path. Indeed his whole compositional life has involved a dialogue between the part of him in thrall to what Seidl calls 'abundant light' and the part of him that declaims with Müller: 'I shudder at my youth. How far it is to the grave' ('Der greise Kopf') (disc 34, track 7).

When we listen to these songs and others like them, we agree with the composer's slightly surprised yet deeply convinced recognition of his calling: 'Tell me, How shall I, earth-born, entertain the heavenly choir? Bestow on me your immortal life. O gods' ('Dithyrambe': disc 32; track 8).

Graham Johnson's monumental achievement in recording Schubert's complete vocal music with piano for the British record label Hyperion is a project which makes an important contribution to Schubertian scholarship and recorded literature. In this reissue of the series Schubert's songs are arranged in chronological order: the rich programming of disc 32 assembles songs from March 1826 to January 1827; disc 33 brings light to bear on songs written between February and July 1827, including an extraordinary recording of Schubert's *Winterreise* (Part One), while disc 34 brings us part two of *Winterreise* along with many unfamiliar gems – 'Drei Gesänge' D. 902 (disc 34; tracks 1–3), 'Heimliches Lieben' D. 922 (disc 34; track 4), 'Eine altschottische Ballade' D. 923 (disc 34; track 5) and 'Der Hochzeitsbraten' D. 930 (disc 34; track 18) – from July to November 1827, exactly one year before Schubert's untimely death. Johnson's ordering of Schubert's *Winterreise* is not unprecedented: Schubert himself allowed the song cycle to be published in two parts, in January and December 1828.<sup>3</sup>

Within the boundaries of chronology, Johnson's innovative programming bears testimony to Schubert's astonishing versatility. The richness of Schubert's lyrical and dramatic imagination is beautifully served by Johnson's musical calendar: in volume 32 songs of high drama, such as the subtly ambiguous

<sup>3</sup> Graham Johnson, Programme Notes: '1827: A Schubert Calendar': 314.

music of 'Über Wildemann' (disc 32; track 7) which feels as if it might take a different direction at any moment, are followed by such light-hearted songs as 'Trinklied' (disc 32; track 9), which Richard Jackson makes the most of. As the musical drama of disc 32 unfolds, moments of musical catharsis are offered through fine performances of Schubert's *Ständchen*, 'Horch, horch! Die Lerch' (disc 32; track 10), where Christine Schaefer captures the lightness of the text beautifully, or John Mark Ainsley's easy rendition of 'An Silvia' (disc 32; track 11), performed with quiet intensity. The concluding songs of the disc include Anthony Rolfe Johnson's ever-sensitive rendition of 'Alinde' D. 904 (disc 32; track 16), an unusual text, expertly set by Schubert, and 'Der Vater mit dem Kind' D. 906 (disc 32; track 18): a picture of domestic happiness of a kind rarely expressed in song today. Such striking variety of mood is again evident in the programme and interpretations of disc 33: 'Frühlingslied' (disc 33; track 19), sung by Juliane Banse, is far removed from *Winterreise*; Goerne brings both power and tenderness where they are needed in 'Der Lindenbaum' (disc 33; track 5) and 'Wasserflut' (disc 33; track 6), where Johnson sensitively matches the many shades of light and dark in Goerne's singing. Disc 34 opens, in a similar vein, with the charming and lively 'L'incanto degli occhi' of *Drei Gesänge* D. 902 (disc 34; track 1), the lovely singing line of which is clearly enjoyed by Gerard Finley, and it is striking how Schubert remains so completely himself even with an Italian text. Finley sings the second of this set, 'Il traditor deluso' (disc 34; track 2), with a fine sense of the dramatic, following on with an interestingly immoral (anonymous) text: 'Il modo di prender moglie' (How to choose a wife) (disc 34; track 3). The light tone of the music perfectly apprehends a mood – rather as if Don Giovanni were to consider marriage – and Finley delivers just the right lightness of approach. Such contrasts are again evident in the pleasant 'Heimliches Lieben' (disc 34; track 4) and 'Eine altschottische Ballade' (disc 34; track 5), a highly dramatic song performed with great sensitivity, yet maintaining a sense of the evil in the background at all times. Both singers excel: Maria McLaughlin, with a beautifully suggestive representation of the mother, and Thomas Hampson, who sings with a combination of restraint and grim concentration. These two fine singers combine with a masterfully suggestive, ever-sensitive accompanist in an ideal interpretation. This is lieder singing at its best.

One of the joys of this reissue of the Hyperion recordings is the range of different singers chosen from among the greatest lieder singers of our times, all of whom are accompanied by Johnson's fine musical intelligence. In his introductory notes to disc 20 of the edition, Johnson explains this range of singers in the context of a Schubertiad:

It seems fitting that the Schubert Edition should mirror the diversity of age and experience among the present-day performers of Schubert's songs by presenting a handful of programmes where a number of artists – for the most part friends and colleagues in real life – give new life to a format, the Schubertiad, sanctioned by the composer himself. Each of these discs will be devoted to the solo songs of a certain period, as if a large musical party was being given at the end of a year to take stock of its creative achievements.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, such understanding of Schubertian practice permeates Johnson's insightful interpretations. Many accounts of Schubert's performances in correspondence of

<sup>4</sup> Graham Johnson, *Sleeve Notes: The Hyperion Schubert Edition, Vol. 20 – An 1815 Schubertiad I* (CDJ33020), p. 2.

that time have come down to us. One of Pichler's friends, Count von Osten, recalled how: 'Schubert sang several of his songs quite beautifully, performing them with a wealth of feeling and profundity' and stressed how his performances were 'moving' and 'unified'.<sup>5</sup> So too Ferdinand Hiller recalled:

In early 1827, I travelled to Vienna with my teacher [Johann Nepomuk Hummel] where I was supposed to see and speak to Beethoven a few weeks before his death; we had never heard of Schubert. A young friend of Hummel's, the former singer, Katharina Buchwieser ... raved about him and his songs. It was in her house that Schubert was introduced to the famous conductor [Hummel]. We ate there several times in the company of the quiet young man and his companion, the tenor [sic], Vogl. The latter, already old but full of fire and life, had very little voice left – and the piano playing of Schubert, in spite of considerable skill, was far from masterly. And yet, I have never again heard Schubert's songs as at that time! Vogl knew how to make one forget his vocal shortcomings by using his most intimate, striking expressions, and Schubert accompanied, as he had to accompany. One piece followed another – we were insatiable – the performers tireless. ... It was a revelation. On one of the days that followed, I visited Schubert in his shabby room ... 'You compose so much', I said to the young master. 'I write every morning for a few hours, he replied in a modest voice, 'and when I finish one piece I begin another.'<sup>6</sup>

A similar unity of performance permeates these volumes and distinguishes Johnson's unique contribution to Schubertian song. In 'Im Frühling' (disk 32, track 5), Peter Schreier is completely at one with the song stylistically; perfect diction and clarity of expression is evident in both text and music, where an exquisite command of *rubato* gently underscores the musical message; in 'Dithyrambe' (disc 32, track 8), Fassbinder has an approach that nears speech: intense and vital. A sense of wonder pervades 'Nachthelle' (disc 32, track 13), where the choir echoes the sentiments of the soloists with conviction: 'I am filled to overflowing with a wondrous brightness; inside I feel free quite without joy or sorrow. In my heart's house I cannot contain all this abundant light'.

These glorious settings, however, shine in a light that is more than the simple light of nostalgic recall. Memory, obviously, is the source of the musical images, but the point of art is not just to indulge in the pleasures of recollection.

The motive through these songs is an intense, even obstinate desire to keep poets and experiences – both valorous and atrocious – from being forgotten. In each setting Schubert is acutely aware of his covenant with the poet and the experienced phenomena.

'Let the quick, bold battle cry awaken my sleeping mind', he declares via the poet in 'Lebensmut' (disc 32, track 6), and he continues: 'So that once more desire and daring, anger and love, weal and woe pound me with their waves on life's stormy sea, and I boldly, bravely struggling, steer my boat with the current that sweeps me along, happy in my well-trying strength'. When he sets such lines, Schubert raises his voice against every nihilism. He is a faith-wielder. What is uniquely convincing is the tone, a feeling that his musical voice is trustworthy, that it knows what it sings. It wins our confidence because its musical statements have about them the big-lettered clarity of a child's reader and the steady

<sup>5</sup> Count Anton Prokesch von Osten's diary entry for 5 March 1822 can be found in Otto Erich Deutsch, *Schubert: A Documentary Biography* (London: Dent, 1946), p. 213.

<sup>6</sup> Ferdinand Hiller's 1830 reminiscence of Schubert appears in Otto Erich Deutsch, *Schubert: Die Erinnerungen seiner Freunde* (Leipzig: VEB Breitkopf & Härtel, 1957): 325–6.

reliability of the veteran. These songs are manifestly the work of one whose counsel to himself has been as follows:

Let me navigate in the knowledge  
that I am alone on this earth  
then my mind will not flinch  
before terrors, before the unknown.  
(‘Schiffers Scheidelied’: disc 33; track 14)

Schubert is revered because he combines the archetypal roles of Orpheus and Mnemosyne, being capable of both rhapsody and reflection: ‘Now a new light has dawned, the time of sadness is past, and many join me on my path’ (‘Am Fenster’, disc 32, track 2). When you peruse such settings you want him as your critic, your counsellor, your companion. And when you listen to these recordings, his wisdom, musical abundance and acuity are made even more available to you, and you realize that you did not overestimate him in any of these roles.

His timelessness is audible in the performance of every song. His lieder satisfy the appetite for seriousness and joy that the word ‘song’ awakens. He restores the child’s eternity at the water’s edge, but equally registers the adult’s dismay that his name is ‘writ on water’; his mortal knowledge that ‘I do not have much further to walk with my staff’.<sup>7</sup> He helps the rest of us to keep faith with those moments when we are suddenly alive to the sweetness of living in the body, yet he won’t absolve us from the penalties of being human.

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#### Discs 35–38

That the Hyperion Schubert Edition (as it sometimes calls itself) is indisputably a landmark achievement there can be no question. An accompanying book, together with the sleeve notes that come with the original CDs, will no doubt serve as the source of much of what most listeners will come to know about Schubert and his songs. Graham Johnson, its author, modestly subtitles its preface ‘An accompanist’s memories’. Johnson, however, is no mere accompanist, but rather the *spiritus rector* of the project. In the opening lines of his prefatory remarks, Johnson writes, ‘It took Franz Schubert eighteen years (1810–1828) to write his lieder. It has taken Hyperion Records exactly the same amount of time (1987–2005) to record all the songs, to issue them on thirty-seven separate discs (with over sixty solo singers), and now to re-issue the vocal music with piano in an edition remastered in the order of their composition’. Beneath the modesty, a bolder ambition might be teased from this innocent comparison: to be to the performance of Schubert’s songs what Schubert was to the composition of them. There is indeed something seductive in this. A project engaging more than 60 solo singers will ensure a considerable range of performing styles, of interpretive modes. And there is the figure of Johnson himself, at the keyboard for virtually the entire 18 years. His keen sense of a Schubert style is very much of its time and place: of music-making in the England of the past twenty-some years. These

<sup>7</sup> Franz Schubert/Wilhelm Müller: *Winterreise* D911 15, ‘Die Krähe’, ll.9–10. Disc 34, track 8, sung by Matthias Goerne.