

Schubert *Die Winterreise*

The harsh landscape of February in Maine provides a near ideal setting for today's performance of Franz Schubert's great song cycle *Die Winterreise*. These 24 songs present us with a chilling first person narrative full of bitterness, alienation, depression and despair. Our protagonist has been rejected by his former sweetheart, and now wanders aimlessly through a frozen world, alone with his dark passions, bittersweet memories, morbid fantasies, and suicidal impulses. That's the bad news, but before you decide to discreetly slip out, take courage. The very good news is that Schubert responded to this bleak and dark subject matter with a wonderful flood of astonishing musical inspiration and emotional sympathy. Although in a good performance of *Die Winterreise* we feel all of the poor wanderer's hurt and despondency, this harrowing and even cathartic experience can at the same time be most exhilarating and affirming. The transcendent beauty and power of Schubert's artistic statement account for this apparent paradox.

With his genius for songwriting, Schubert almost single handedly established the art song or *lied* as a genre of central importance for the Romantic era. With his over six hundred songs, displaying an almost endless variety, he also brought the *lied* to its highest level of expression and perfection. Schubert composed songs with sure instinct, remarkable facility, and uncanny psychological understanding. His first song masterpiece, *Gretchen am Spinnrade*, dates from the age of 17. During his career, Schubert composed two unified song cycles, each time utilizing groups of poems by Wilhelm Müller. *Die Schöne Müllerin* (The Beautiful Miller's Daughter) dates from 1823 and follows an emotional trajectory from light and joyous to sweetly sad. Schubert began work on *Die Winterreise* in 1827 and let his friends know that the creation of these stark,

powerful songs gave him more satisfaction than any others. Surely some of Schubert's own recent setbacks and failing health are given expression in *Winterreise*, but we must remember that in his last two years he also wrote plenty of music that bubbles with happiness and springtime. The complete version of *Die Winterreise* was printed in 1828, one month after Schubert's death at age 31. I find the image of Schubert, propped up in his deathbed (as we are told), carefully correcting printer's proofs, very poignant and poetically apt.

Die Winterreise demands work and engagement from an audience; it is not easy listening. Our goal should be to attentively and empathetically enter into the world of our hapless "hero." Note the daringly expressive, almost modern sounding quality of the songs. Note the delicate balance Schubert maintains. For all the slow tempos, pauses, minor keys, jagged lines, and wrenching expressions of pain, Schubert uses just enough variety, melodic interest, transitory (ironic) sweetness, and forward momentum to carry the listener along. Attend carefully to the piano, always an equal partner to the voice. In addition to establishing the characteristic mood for each of these "variations on the theme of grief" (Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau), the piano wonderfully depicts or evokes such imagery as a weathervane in the wind, tear drops falling, the wanderer's resolute tread, dogs growling, a rooster crowing, a post horn, and - perhaps most memorably - the steady drone and pathetic melody of an old street organ. Understanding the German words being sung is critically important, so please make use of the following translations. (The texts do not include the many repetitions Schubert has added within the songs.) I must remark in closing that music of this subtlety and depth is often best appreciated after repeated hearing. If you are new to *Die Winterreise*, consider acquiring a recording and really making these songs your own.

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