

Notes on the Program

By Arthur R. Smith

Tenor Piotr Beczala and pianist Martin Katz begin their Vocal Arts DC recital with one of the glories of repertoire, Robert Schumann's song cycle *Dichterliebe*, (Poet's Love), his 1840 setting of poetry from Heinrich Heine's *Buch der Lieder*. The backdrop to this work, and indeed most of Schumann's lieder from that remarkable year, was his fraught courtship with the pianist Clara Wieck. Clara's father opposed the union, Schumann, not exactly a low-maintenance fiancé, caused some emotional turmoil of his own. In his book on the Schumann songs, the baritone Dietrich Fischer-Diskau relates a suggestive line of poetry by Rückert that he feels applies to the composer and this cycle, "Dichterliebe hat eignes Unglück stets betroffen. Hohe Götter, lasset mich das Beste hoffen!" A poet's love is always beset with misfortune; Oh, Lord, let me hope for the best!"

The protagonist of this cycle certainly embodies this sentiment: beset as he is by the plagues of unrequited love, and whose hopes and dreams are ultimately bundled up and tossed into deep water. The story unfolds in episodes (akin to Schumann's sets of piano works exploring an idea or scene, such as *Carnaval* or *Waldszenen*). He is notable in lieder for the vivid scene painting he provides via the piano introductions and postludes to the songs. Even the very first measures of in "Im wunderschönen Monat Mai" demonstrate this: the bittersweet nature of this love story are shaped by arpeggios that keep asking a question but getting an equivocal answer; in fact, we don't land on the main key of the piece until six measures in, when the singer says "Mai" May. The piano's full partnership in the work supports the drama, embodying the scenes of nature for instance, or the might of the Rhine, and also illuminates (and even gently satirizes) the nearly manic emotional state of the protagonist.

In a work that abounds with beautiful moments, each person will have his or her treasure for which to listen. Two of mine, on the chance they will add to your store of enjoyment: The piano line grandeur of "Im Rhein, im heiligen Strome" that evokes a dissonant and unforgiving Bach prelude, and backdrops the protagonist's hallucinatory (and creepily gothic) merging of the Madonna's image with that of his beloved. In a completely different vein, "Hör ich das Liedchen klingen" with its use of a simple piano texture and sadly contemplative vocal line to limn a heart-breaking memory, hard fought restraint finally gives way to tears that burst forth in the piano postlude.

In the second half of tonight's program, we turn again to late romantic song, completing the rich tour of this repertoire that Vocal Arts DC artists have provided this season. (Earlier concerts have encompassed explorations of Mahler, Strauss, Berg and Chausson among others.) The Polish composer Mieczysław Karłowicz (1876-1909) takes a strong place in this tradition, writing a warm-hearted violin concerto (his own instrument), a series of tone poems, and some 22 songs, before being killed by an avalanche in the Tatra Mountains age 32 while skiing. Karłowicz's songs date from the late 1890s, when he was studying in Berlin, and are settings of poems mainly by his contemporaries, most frequently his favorite poet, Kazimierz Przerwa-Tetmajer (1865–1940), a member of the Young Poland movement, a progressive and neo-romantic group of writers and painters. His works are brief, within a minute or two he provides a lyric meditation on a scene or

emotion in a musical style that blends Strauss and Tchaikovsky, but with a more placid temperament and perhaps less troubled heart than either of these peers.

Dvořák's glowing *Cikánské melodie*, op. 55 follow. These folk-inspired songs date from 1880, a commission from a tenor, Gustav Walter, who was later to give the premiere of some of the songs in Vienna. The question of German or Czech for Opus 55 is a tricky one. The poetry, by the Czech nationalist, Adolf Heyduk (1835-1923) comes from his book *Gypsy Melodies*. (In common with many volumes of 19th century folklore, the distinction between 'collected by' and 'written by' in these poems is a little fuzzy.)

Whatever their origin, seven poems were selected by Dvořák who asked Heyduk to make German translations, which he did, taking pains to preserve the rhythmic character of the original verses.

The resulting songs, Dvořák's best loved, are now often performed in Czech (an edition that Dvořák prepared later, making minor changes to accommodate the requirements of the language, and some other musical changes). Although folk-influenced—listen for the evocation of the cimbalom, a dulcimer like instrument—these are original art songs, their immediate emotional appeal achieved through accomplished musical technique. "Songs my mother taught me" for instance, uses two different time signatures, a waltz-like 6/8 against 2/4 in the voice. The resulting cross rhythms allow this song to express the fugitive, precious senses of memories from childhood.

Our final late romantic is Sergei Rachmaninoff, 1873-1943. The piano looms large in any consideration of this composer. His coruscating concerti for the instrument, as well as the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, are perennial hits (and tempting mountaintops to scale for today's seemingly unending supply of young virtuosi). But the glories of these extroverted pieces may obscure the Rachmaninoff who was a sensitive song composer and musical dramatist—responsive to texts, and shaping his formidable piano idiom to the needs of a contemplative, even tragic mode. We rarely think of this composer as restrained, yet often his song writing exhibits just this: dark-hued, radiant, and inward looking.

Rachmaninoff's songs come from the first part of his life (he did not write any after leaving Russia in 1917), and tonight's works were composed during the years after he completed his conservatory training in 1892 and married in 1902. Marriage was in fact the impetus for one of his best-loved songs, "Lilacs," part of a group he wrote to raise some money for the wedding. "Lilacs" builds its material from a small musical cell introduced in the first moments: just a few repeating alternating notes really, yet a figure that build to a wonderful tapestry over which the voice soars.