

THE CHALLENGING MASTERPIECE

When does a work of art cease being new and challenging and take its place in the hall of fame? Is it possible to brush the dust off such work and reinstate it within a contemporary context?

There are no simple answers to the question, primarily because a work is first judged in the context of its time, and in quite another manner by following generations. Numerous works have passed into oblivion as uninteresting reflections of their times, whereas others have maintained a momentum of originality and freshness and continue to capture the imagination of future audiences.

A work in the latter category is «Die Winterreise» by Franz Schubert, hailed by scholars as perhaps his best vocal cycle. In this work one finds both the light and the sincere Schubert, and above all the composer who develops the Lied to a complete art form, and who gives the piano part as vital a role as the vocal part. But «Die Winterreise» is also a testament to the poet Wilhelm Müller, those works were banned in his time, and who, no doubt, would have been forgotten, had it not been for the music of Franz Schubert.

In the romantic era the concept of the journey was often allegorically applied to express the changeability of life as well as the human ability to allow change to happen. The traveller wasn't simply on his way towards a geographical destination, but also on an existential journey, passing through new forms of experience, forms of existence which today, from one point of view, are optimized through exposure to extreme sports and journeys to the South Pole. But whereas «Die schone Mullerin» was written almost in the form of a pleasant game for the musical salon, «Die Winterreise» should be understood in the context of an allegory expressing human alienation and the longing for death. Here, in the works of the young Schubert one may glimpse a chimera of the modern impulse in European music which signals the entrance of Mahler and Schonberg two generations later. This may be hard to grasp for many of today's listeners: Schubert's song cycle is, after all, supposed to be performed by two middle-aged men in black and white tuxedos!

This may well have previously been the case, but no longer applies. Since 1997, a completely new interpretation of this revolutionary piece dramatically challenges our values and places it with authority into our own time, retaining contact with the original qualities of the work.

The conductor and composer Hans Zender has achieved a riveting interpretation of Schubert with Ensemble Modern and the tenor Hans Petter Blochwitz. His interpretation both is and is not an arrangement of Schubert. It both is and is not an insult to Schubert. Zender has delved into the work and composed an entirely new interpretation much like Berio did with his «Folk Songs» nearly 30 years ago. He has turned Schubert's own textures inside-out in order to catch surprising sounds and create new ways of understanding this material.

Few if any new interpretations of older works has touched me to the extent that this version has done, perhaps because discussions of authenticity are not at all the aim of the piece. The focus is instead on the context of the work in relation to communication with today's audiences. Schubert is written into a new context - the orchestration techniques and understanding of sound as of the late 1900s. Most of the time Zenders version adds enriching dimensions to the work. He shows great intuition in building up the inherent atmosphere in each of the songs, while making use of a large chamber orchestra to evoke both a salon orchestra as well as a folkloristic ensemble sound and even the impression of a a modern sinfonietta.

Hans Zender has created an interpretation of Schuberts most important cycles which at times both shake us and fascinate us. This is no doubt one of the most exiting re-interpretations of a romantic piece achieved in recent years. With such competence on every level I am forced to listen to it again and again to confirm what was heard the first time. Zenders version of «Die Winterreise» is essential for anyone who wants to know how to relate to tradition.

GEIR JOHNSON