Recital 5: The Schwanengesang Poets: Rellstab, Heine, and Seidl:
Program

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Your generous support is greatly appreciated.

Schubertiade

Jiayan Sun, piano
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Sweeney Concert Hall, Sage Hall
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short pause

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Music Festival and Festival d’Aix-en-Provence. He is an Associate Professor of Voice at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Please visit www.williamhitetenor.com

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Ludwig Rellstab (1799-1866) was a pianist, a poet, and a music critic who, in the course of the eighteen-thirties, became a highly influential figure on the German musical scene. At least fifty of his poems were set by the composers of his era, including ten by Schubert alone, in 1828. In his memoirs, Rellstab tells us that he gave some of his poems to Beethoven in 1825, and when that master died, he retrieved them and passed them along to Schubert. Rellstab’s memoirs were published in 1861, thirty-five years after the fact. Beethoven’s amanuensis, Anton Schindler, rather said that Schubert found the Rellstab poems himself, while looking through Beethoven’s papers. Caveat lector.

Johann Gabriel Seidl (1804-1875) was a Viennese poet, schoolteacher, and bureaucrat. He was a personal acquaintance of Schubert’s, he wrote an elegy at the time of the composer’s death, and was the father of the man who later married Franz Schubert’s niece. He was conservative as a political thinker and conservative as a writer. A critic said of a collection of his poetry that “the poems are pretty, but for the purpose of musical composition one could wish for a more careful linguistic finish and desire at least that they should be free of false accents and make fewer words on that which they express” (which seems to be another way of saying that they are verbose). In a book on Schwanengesang, Martin Chusid quotes a letter that Schubert wrote to Seidl, in the summer of 1828, which begins: “Most highly esteemed Herr Gabriel! Enclosed I send you back these poems, in which I could discover absolutely nothing poetic or useful for music.” Presumably, “highly esteemed” is an exaggeration of the sort common among friends, which may be why the criticism is expressed in such stark terms. Be that as it may, Seidl, today, like others among Schubert’s poets, is remembered, if at all, thanks to the great composer.

Heinrich Heine (1796-1856), on the other hand, did not depend on Schubert for his celebrity. Die Heimkehr (The Homecoming; 1826), the collection of eighty-eight poems from which Schubert selected six (numbers 8, 14, 16, 20, 23, and 24), and Heine’s other poetry (Die Heimkehr became the fifth part of the 1827 Buch der Lieder, which was reissued at least a dozen times over the following fifty years), would find an exalted place in the history of nineteenth-century German lyric poetry. In the less exalted field of music history, Schubert’s six Heine settings (like Robert Schumann’s Dichterliebe on poems by Heine, set down thirteen years later) are conspicuously prized as objects of fastidious musical analyses and, far more important, of warm musical appreciation.

The hallmarks of Heine’s poetic style, irony and detachment, are not readily translated into music. Do you hear them here?

—Peter Bloom

Grace Jarcho Ross 1933 Professor of Humanities, Emeritus
song on this evening’s Schwanengesang plus, is its nature, its quality. It has been heard as inappropriately lighthearted, especially following upon the darkly brooding poems by Heine and upon the heels (as it does in the original collection) of the most ghostly song of them all, “Der Döppelgänger.” It has been seen as a crass commercial maneuver on the part of a publisher who, by adding a pop tune, would alert potential buyers of the essentially entertaining character of the whole. It has been criticized as antithetical to the essential ethos of Schubert’s final days and final musical style. To which I would say (as one who learned the song before knowing anything about Schubert, Lieder, or 1828)—Unsinn! Nonsense! The German word is here because in his early years Schubert belonged to a secret club of young painters and poets known as the Unsinngesellschaft, or Nonsense Society. (Indeed, the word Unsinniade, pertaining to a meeting of the club, may have led, according to the Schubert scholar Rita Steblin, to the word Schubertiade itself.) “Der Taubenpost” is certainly charming and apparently unassuming, but, like the final B-flat Sonata, which Jiayan Sun finds tinged with anxiety, the final song, too, is not care free.

You have the texts and translations of the poems; you will enjoy finding the main poetic themes and hearing the musical equivalents that Schubert discovered for them, for it must be remembered that a Lied (we use the German word because we refer to a musical setting of a poem of literary import, and because, if it’s German, it’s got to be serious)—a Lied is nothing more or less than a composer’s individual reading of the poem that she or he has chosen to set. In the opening song, “Liebesbotshaft” (“Love’s Message”), for example, you will hear, in the piano, the “rauschendes Bächlein” (“murmuring brook”) that flows towards the narrator’s beloved: Schubert is the greatest of all masters when it comes to representing water in music. In “Ihr Bild” (“Her Portrait”), you will hear, in the stark, twice-repeated octaves, an apparent allusion to the “Augenpaar,” the two glistening eyes of the narrator’s beloved, as he stares at her likeness through the darkness of a dream. And so, subtly, adroitly, does Schubert proceed.

In the notes for Jiayan Sun’s concerts, I have made much ado about keys: these are the building blocks of the major-minor tonal system, which is the musical equivalent of the solar system itself. In the large-scale compositions, you cannot change the key without destroying the structure. On the small scale, however, on the level, for example, of the individual song, you can change the key without damage: singers regularly transpose songs from their original keys to keys that suit their voices. I am advised that Mr. Hite sings the songs in their original keys. The key relations here, between one song and the next, because he has chosen the order of the songs, are his.

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