

PROGRAM NOTES



Nine Songs on Poems by Ernst Schulze

FRANZ SCHUBERT

b. January 31, 1797, Vienna, Austria

d. November 19, 1828, Vienna, Austria

Performance Time

33 minutes

Ernst Schulze (1789-1817) led the sort of life romantic poets wrote about: educated at Göttingen, he suffered a devastating emotional loss (the death of his fiancée), became a soldier, and died of tuberculosis at 26. Schubert planned to write an opera on Schulze's *Die bezauberte Rose*, but abandoned those plans. Schulze's poems were gathered and published in 1822 as his *Poetisches Tagebuch* ("Poetic Diary" or "Poetic Journal"), and this recital adopts that title as its own. Schubert made his ten Schulze settings in 1825-26, and this recital offers nine of those ten songs. In many of these songs we confront a romantic archetype: the lonely wanderer, filled with pain as he makes his desolate way across the countryside. This would be a favorite subject with Schubert as well, and it has been noted that a number of his Schulze settings strongly prefigure his *Winterreise* songs.

Auf der Brücke is one of these (that title translates "On the Bridge," but Schubert scholar John Reed points out that the title is Schubert's own and may reflect his misunderstanding of the title of Schulze's poem — "Bruck" is actually the name of a specific hill in Germany). In this song, an anxious rider travels through the rainy night, pushed along by both love and doubt as his horse's hooves sound in the steady eighth-notes of the accompaniment. This wanderer is not so much moved by pain as he is by love, and Schubert's setting is full of power, from the piano's powerful introduction (almost orchestral in its scope) to the firm stride of the vocal line.

If *Auf der Brücke* introduced one romantic stereotype, *Der leibliche Stern* introduces another: the longing for the ineffable, the unattainable. In some romantic poetry, that longing can bring suffering and an acute sense of dislocation — and there is a hint of that in Schulze's text — here Schubert chooses to portray that longing as a source of happiness and possibility. He sets Schulze's text to a flowing melody, and the steady sixteenths in the pianist's right hand bubble along cheerfully throughout.

The lonely protagonist of *Im Walde* wanders bleakly across a radiant countryside, always aware that he cannot share fully in the wonders he sees around him. Schubert propels him along his way with steady triplets in the piano accompaniment, and

while he takes care to mark the song “Not too fast,” we feel that pulse incessantly pushing the poem forward. The shifting moods of the poem are reflected in Schubert’s smoothly evolving harmonies, but the final word is left to the piano, whose triplets draw the song quietly into silence.

The situation in *Um Mitternacht* might at first seem potentially dark: a lonely speaker recalls a distant lover and in his loneliness longs for her whispered words. But the poem itself is light in mood, and Schubert gives it a pleasing setting, evident from its first instant, where the music dances along a delicate *pianissimo*.

The protagonist in *Lebensmut* is once again a young man, but rather than being a lonely outsider, this youth is on fire with enthusiasm for life. Schubert’s marking “Rather quick, but powerful” tells us how he wants this text sung, and he emphasizes the youth’s resolution with a series of firm fanfare-like figures in the piano that continue throughout. This youth seems in constant motion (the “oom-pah” accompaniment stamps out a steady march rhythm), and at the end comes a salvo of the fanfare figures from the piano.

Im Frühling (March 1826) is one of the finest lieder ever written. The setting is yet one more archetype of romanticism — the indolent poet on the warm hillside, reflecting on life — but Schubert’s song takes us far beyond that basic situation. Somehow every part of this song comes together perfectly: the piano’s graceful opening melody, which then is transformed in each of the three following verses; the floating, arcing vocal line above the evolving piano accompaniment; the quicksilver changes of mood; the move into G minor for the third stanza as the poet reflects on the meaning of time and change; and the warmth of the closing return to G major.

By contrast, *An mein Herz* is a dramatic song — Schubert’s marking is “Somewhat fast and unsettled.” The poet looks back with joy and regret at a past love, and the final stanza seems to offer a consoling moral, but what comes through in Schubert’s setting is the ambivalence of the poem. We feel this in the subtle flickering between major and minor keys, and the wonderful piano introduction, which returns throughout to push this song forward and finally leads to its (perhaps) calm close.

The final two songs take us back to the lonely outcast, alienated not just from the society of man but from life itself. *Tiefes Leid* shows us a grieving wanderer who will find peace only in death and longs for that cold release. Schulze’s poem is intense, though Schubert’s strophic setting feels more reflective than agonized.

Über Wildemann seems like a song right out of *Winterreise*: the poet, on a horse, looks down from the mountains on a sunlit village and recognizes that he cannot partake of that happiness but must forever remain the outsider. This song rips past in two minutes, as the horse’s hooves pound in the piano accompaniment, the singer almost breathlessly gives us Schulze’s powerful text, and the hooves pound right to the sudden final chord.

Eight Songs on Poems by Different Poets

FRANZ SCHUBERT

b. January 31, 1797, Vienna, Austria

d. November 19, 1828, Vienna, Austria

Performance Time

40 minutes

The second half of this program presents eight songs by six poets. It is a measure of Schubert's awareness of contemporary poetry that many of these songs were written within just a year or two of the publication of their texts. In fact, in some cases Schubert knew the poet and set texts before they were published — Schubert worked from the poet's manuscript.

Schubert wrote six songs on texts by the German poet and scholar Friedrich Rückert (1788-1866), and this half of the recital opens with three of these, all composed 1822-23. All three are from Rückert's *Östliche Rosen* ("Eastern Roses"), which had itself appeared in 1822. Rückert was an authority on Asian languages and poetry, and his own poetry attracted a number of composers, including not only Schubert but also Schumann, Brahms, Wolf, Mahler, and Strauss.

Dass sie hier gewesen is a delicate poem and song: Schubert keeps the dynamic at *pianissimo* almost throughout, and the conflicts of the brief text are mirrored in his surprising harmonies.

A strange tension runs throughout *Greisengesang*, and John Reed has pointed out that while Rückert's poem accepts the fact of old age and finds pleasures in it, Schubert's setting is dark, almost tragic. We feel this from the first instant, when the piano's chordal prelude sets the tone, and the progress of the song is frequently halted by Schubert's use of a fermata at the end of phrases. The vocal line trails off into silence, making the piano's firm close all the more surprising.

The stunning *Du bist die Ruh*' is a rapt expression of love, and Schubert's setting is effective precisely because it seems so restrained. The marking is "Slow," the dynamic *pianissimo*, and the voice sings the opening lines softly over subdued accompaniment. This song, though, is very subtly made. It is strophic, with the stanzas set off by brief piano interludes, but in the third stanza the voice — previously so understated — soars upward on the line "von deinem Glanz allein erhelt" as the passion behind these gentle words suddenly breaks loose. Schubert repeats this, and then the song falls away to its quiet close, with all its intensity still echoing in the air.

Poet, novelist, and aphorist, Friedrich von Schlegel (1772-1829) married Mendelssohn's aunt and spent his career in government service in Vienna; apparently he never met Schubert, who wrote sixteen songs on his texts by (Friedrich should not be confused with his brother August Wilhelm, who made superb translations of Shakespeare into German and whose poetry Schubert also set). One of the central

ideas in Schlegel's philosophy was his sense of the unity between man and nature: in his poetry, nature can be an ecstatic experience precisely because it is — in its many faces — a manifestation of the divine spirit. *Im Walde* ("In the Woods," composed in 1820) reflects that message: in the wind roaring through the forests the poet senses the presence of a larger force that subsumes us all, and Schubert catches the ecstasy of this theme in this song's endless rush of energy.

The piano prelude to *Nacht und Träume* (1822) sets the delicate, suspended mood of this song perfectly; the piano accompaniment looks ominously "black" on the page, but so restrained is the smoothly-rocking pattern of sixteenth-notes that the vocal line seems to float above this glowing accompaniment. Matthäus von Collin's magical evocation of night and the ineffable, unknowable world of dreams seems an almost pure statement of romantic sentiment. Half a century later, Gabriel Fauré would get at exactly this same sensation in a very different song, *Après un reve*.

Franz Xaver von Schlechta (1796-1875) was a friend of Schubert (they were born within months of each other), a poet, and eventually a department head in the Ministry of Finance in Vienna. He and Schubert were close, and it appears that Schubert set eight poems by Schlechta before the poet published them in 1824. *Fischerweise* is a strophic song, with the first several verses set to the same jaunty music, but the mood and music change subtly at "Dort angelt auf der Brücke": Schubert nicely emphasizes the words "Schlauer Wicht" and then marks the remainder of the song *leise*: "gentle."

Todtengräbers Heimweh ("Grave-Digger's Longing") sets a text that Jacob Nicolaus Craigher (1797-1855) wrote specifically for Schubert to set. The song, composed during the spring of 1825, records a grave-digger's gradually being consumed by the constant presence of death. Schubert's marking sets its tone: "Moving unpeacefully."

Schubert came to the poetry of Karl Gottfried von Leitner (1800-1890) very late in his life, and all but one of his eleven settings of Leitner poems come from just about a year before the composer's death. *Der Winterabend* dates from January 1828. This situation of this song is very like that of *Greisengesang*, heard earlier on this program: in both songs an old man looks back on his life with a certain contentment. But where Schubert gave *Greisengesang* a dark setting, now that situation produces a song full of peace. *Der Winterabend* looks very "black" on the page: a steady pulse of sixteenths is heard throughout the entire song, but their effect here is calming in its steady, quiet repetition.

– Program notes by Eric Bromberger