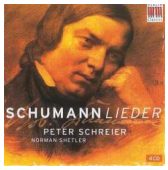
Robert Schumann - Lieder (Peter Schreier) [1994]



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Nikolaus Lenau Und Requiem (Altkatholisches Gedicht) Op.90: 5. Einsamkeit 21. Sechs Gedichte Von Nikolaus Lenau Und Requiem (Altkatholisches Gedicht) Op.90: 6. Der Schwere Abend 22. Sechs Gedichte Von Nikolaus Lenau Und Requiem (Altkatholisches Gedicht) Op.90: 7. Requiem
Peter Schreier (tenor) Norman Shetler (piano)

Now let's face it, chaps, you've been mollycoddled far too long. Think of all those great big Hyperion editions of lieder, mélodie and song which are gradually covering practically every composer who wrote a song worth hearing. Get those and you're getting, not just a CD and a list of titles, you get opus numbers, texts, translations, the names of the poets, dates, and a mammoth essay by Graham Johnson (or Roger Vignoles or somebody equally expert) giving you practically the sum of present-day human knowledge about each song. Even dirt cheap Naxos, though they've taken to sending you to their website for the words, still give you plentiful documentation and a detailed essay. It takes away all the fun of hunting the facts up for yourself.

Well, if you do agree with that, here's the set for you. Faithful, perhaps, to the Spartan ideals of the erstwhile German Democratic Republic in which it was made, it's the musical equivalent of a children's summer camp. You get four discs containing about half Schumann's song output ' practically all those suited to a tenor. You get titles, you get most of the opus numbers, you get texts in German ' well, that's better than nothing ' and Bob's your-uncle.

So this is where you have to team up and do projects. On Disc 1, for example, at the end of 'Liederkreis', there are six songs without any opus numbers given. You could begin by looking those up. Oh dammit, I've already done that for you, in the header ' oh, I could kill myself. Then you could look for translations, you could look up the dates, you could find out who the poets were ' unless they're actually in Schumann's title ' Berlin Classics don't let on. You could try to puzzle out why the programmes have been put together the way they have. You could even try to answer the riddle of why just under half the 'Myrthen' cycle op.25 is presented higgledy-piggledy over two discs. I'm telling you the cycle's called 'Myrthen', by the way, they aren't. For texts, poets, translations and dates, incidentally, your first port of call is likely to be Emily Ezust's wonderful lieder site.

The question of who the poets were would be important in any case, but if I've understood anything, they are actually the basis behind the way the programmes are chosen. CD 1, in fact, is entirely dedicated to Heine. That's what three of the 'Myrthen' songs are doing here ' it's a

composite cycle, setting a number of poets. So your next project might be to work out what struck Schumann particularly about Heine, leading to ‘Dichterliebe’, generally acknowledged as his greatest cycle. But he didn’t only choose lovelorn lyrics about the ‘wonderful month of May’ and the ‘Lotus bloom’ ‘ the range extends to the bizarre mini-cycle about ‘Poor Peter’. In Hyperion’s Volume 5 Graham Johnson draws a chilling parallel between Poor Peter’s madness and Schumann’s fears at the time ‘ ultimately justified ‘about his own growing insanity. Just to give you an idea of the wealth of material available, by the way, that Hyperion disc, beautifully sung by Christopher Maltman, is also dedicated to Heine settings and the programmes are by no means parallel.

CD2 begins with the more famous of the two cycles entitled ‘Liederkreis’ and here the poet is named in Schumann’s title ‘ Joseph von Eichendorff. This is a name that crops up again and again in the lieder repertoire. A website tells me that no poet has been more frequently set to music on account of his lyric, almost folk-like simplicity. A singer of spring and nightingales and ‘Waldeinsamkeit’, he inspired Schumann’s most warmly romantic cycle. Eichendorff also frames the selection of seven songs which follows his poems appear in the first and in the last two. In between are various poets, including Reinick whom we also meet in Brahms. I suppose the idea is to show that they all belong to the same school.

The short Geibel set is followed by another five settings of the same poet. Here the mood is quite different ‘ I get the idea that these very decently-filled CDs may be grouping together a larger number of tightly-programmed if ungenerous LPs. Geibel, at least in this selection, is concerned with picturesque characters and strong colour. Four of the pieces are based on Spanish poems and the three op. 138 songs are from Schumann’s ‘Spanische Liebeslieder’. I suppose ‘character’ and ‘colour’ are also the justification for rounding off the disc with two Gypsy songs from Schumann’s ‘Lieder-Album für die Jugend’.

CD 3 apparently lets the cat out of the bag by telling you it contains ‘Lieder nach Rückert und Goethe’ This, however, is just a trap set for the unwary. First of all, apart from the three op.37 settings which have Rückert’s name in the title, we’re not actually told which poet wrote which poem. And when you do follow this up, you’ll find that more than half the songs are not settings of either of them ‘

I had never particularly associated Rückert with Goethe, not that I’m anything of an expert on German poetry. Schumann seems to find them quite different too, adopting an intimate, gentle tone for Rückert and a more grandly assertive one for Goethe.

Of the other poets, we get a full set ‘op. 40’ from Chamisso, well known as the author of the poems for Schumanns great female-voice cycle Frauenliebe und Leben. Here, however, he is providing German versions of poems by Hans Christian Andersen which, at least as set by Schumann, are far removed from the fairy-tale world by which we normally know him. You might guess the grim Der Soldat was by Mahler. Also included on this disc is a poem by Byron and two Venetian songs by Thomas Moore set in German translations of course.

CD 4 is a very serious affair. The Kerner set is a bleak, austere piece of work, more so at times than the poems seem to demand. It reaches its climax with Stille Tränen, a song of quite extraordinary intensity. Elsewhere I often felt the need for some helpful guidance, Graham Johnson-style, as to what Schumann was trying to do. Is it a question of familiarity? I asked myself, if I had known op. 35 all my life and was coming new to Dichterliebe, would my reactions be the other way round? I think not; this really does seem one of the hardest Schumannesque nuts to crack.

Op. 35 is followed by three further songs, of which the first again has a text by Kerner. Sängers Trost immediately gives the lie to the generalization that higher opus numbers in Schumann are likely to contain less inspired music than lower ones. So, too, does the Lenau cycle which concludes the disc. Though all the songs are slow and introspective, it has a poetic glow which op. 35 seems deliberately to be avoiding. The second song, Meine Rose, is an epitome of all we love most in Schumann and it is surprising it is not excerpted more often.

But what about the performances? I suppose a kinder-hearted critic might have started here, for they re just about perfect. All the more reason to be seriously concerned that the sparse documentation might limit their circulation to specialists.

In the early 1970s Peter Schreiers career was completing its first decade. His artistry was in its first maturity, his vocal equipment still retained its wondrous youthful sheen. There is not a note here which is not inherently beautiful, except perhaps in op. 35 where a whisker of huskiness seems intentional. He can sail up to an unstrained high B flat and is one of the few who can take the higher alternatives in ‘Ich grolle nicht’ without making you wish he hadn’t. It is not a ‘big’ voice and he has never claimed it to be so. But bigness is relative to what is around it and in this context he achieves high drama when necessary while at the other end of the scale he can fine down to an almost whispered, honeyed pianissimo. He rises to passionate heights at the climax of ‘Stille Tränen’. Every word is beautifully weighted in the context of the phrase. It might be called non-interventionist singing which nevertheless intervenes enough to characterize the music. Everything here is deeply considered, from the well-known ‘Dichterliebe’ to the rarer songs. And Norman Shetler is always supportive and present without ever hogging the stage.

Many of these songs were new to me, but as each one started the tempo taken and the mood created always sounded exactly right.

You will be thinking, might there be just a hint in all this of a laid-back, academic manner? Is it all too perfect? Well, when Peter Schreier took up conducting the results sometimes seemed more safe than exciting, but as a singer, at any rate at this stage in his career, he always communicates spontaneity and involvement, however much hard work may have gone into it. There are too many fine 'Dichterliebe' performances around to claim first place for any of them but this matches any on my shelves and I can't imagine a better guide to the less well-known songs.

And what about Schumann himself? Well, in one sense the feeling is confirmed that, if you don't know any Schumann lieder, the essential works are 'Frauenliebe und Leben'' not here for obvious reasons ' and 'Dichterliebe', with the second 'Liederkreis' cycle not far behind. On the other hand, Schumann's range is shown to be wider than one supposed, even though he always remains true to his unmistakeable melodic and harmonic style. While a few of the later songs suggest tiring inspiration there are also many, many beautiful surprises to be found among them.

The voice is excellently recorded throughout. The piano hasn't quite the bloom and resonance of more recent recordings but I barely noticed this. I've said that you get just titles and words in the booklet, but there's one thing more: a curious inversion of roles gives us a 1993 essay by Gerard Felber on 'Peter Schreier as a lieder singer'. I agree with every fulsome word he says. But I thought it was my job to say these things. His job ' or somebody's at Berlin Classics ' was to give you all the information I've put at the beginning of this review.

So there you are. If you're willing to do all the necessary spade-work you'll find your Schumann holiday camp endlessly rewarding. You couldn't expect a better guide than Big-Chief Schreier. But don t stint on your projects, that's all. ---Christopher Howell, musicweb-international.com

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