

Notes on the Program

Saturday, August 10, 2019

By Tim Summers

Clara Schumann (1819-1896)

Selected Songs

It is a strange thing to see how history can collect around a few names, and then to see how one's sense of time, space, and sequence can be distorted by these accidental or convenient constellations of names and rhymes. For example, seeing *Liebst du um Schönheit* on a concert program brings with it an assumption that one will be hearing from the *Rückert-Lieder* of Gustav Mahler. And along with that, one may draw a shaky assumption that 'Rückert' must have been somehow part of the early-Modern Viennese *Jugendstil* — some droopy author or character pursuing self-immolation at the altar of art. But then the song on the program turns out to be from Clara Schumann, Friedrich Rückert turns out to have been a poem-writing philologist, and one just has to start over.

Rückert's *Liebesfrühling* was published in 1821, when Clara Schumann was two years old. Her settings of his work were published as part of Robert Schumann's *Zwölf Gedichte aus Liebesfrühling* in 1841 (one has to look twice to see who wrote the songs *Liebst du um Schönheit* and *Er ist gekommen*). Clara's compositional style is close enough to Robert's (as his to hers), that one can half-hear what they might have discussed along the way. To look closer into the history and sources of either of the Schumanns' songs is to see that there is a rich network of associations between texts, authors, composers, performers, husbands, and wives lying behind their musical pursuits. A surprising amount of Romantic art history does indeed touch directly upon the works and lives of Clara and Robert Schumann, but there was also a lot of chance, context, and real life.

Rückert was older than the Schumanns, but not by so much. He was by all accounts an extraordinary linguist, who spoke and read dozens of languages, specializing in those of Asia, and was well-positioned to thrive in the post-Humboldt intellectual atmosphere. His *Liebesfrühling* would have had a natural place on the Schumann shelf, as would *Die Weisheit des Brahmanen*, or perhaps even his translation of the Quran. His poem *Er ist gekommen*, with its intimations of impassioned meeting and confused identities, must have read to the Schumanns like a description of their own entangled emotional and musical biography. *Liebst du um Schönheit*, also, must have entranced the aesthetically entwined Schumann couple, who must sometimes have wondered for what, exactly, they loved each other.

Emanuel von Geibel, author of *Liebeszauber*, was also a philologist, but with an interest in Classical languages. He would later become one of the leading lyric poets in Germany, but still must have been something of a find for the literary-minded Schumanns in the 1840s. Geibel brings a rather different voice and perspective than Rückert for Clara Schumann to set: the text is not so intertwined, so overcome with love — it brings instead the voice of a seeker, an imitator, a maker of echoes. More formal, but not so bound. More alone.

Perhaps the most curious element of all this philological meandering is how the idea of what's 'classical' seems to lurk behind it, on the German bookcases. To find ur-sources in the East, or in Greece, or in the distant past is a strange dream. Everyone setting of the *Rückert-Lieder* hearkens back not only to Rückert, but to his back-hearkening themes. We hope it will work, we hope it will mean something, all this nostalgic Classicism. Perhaps it is not history after all. Perhaps it is only echoes and reflections as well... but echoes and reflections are, at the least, something left to sing about, when the hurly-burly's done.

Gustav Mahler (1860-1911)

Alfred Schnittke (1934-1998)

Piano Quartet in A minor (1876/1988)

It seems impossible that Gustav Mahler could have written only symphonies and songs. Surely there were some intermediate steps between Mahler's birth and the 'Titan' Symphony No. 1. But whatever steps Mahler took, he left no prints — or almost none. A lone manuscript for a piano quartet was found at the New York home of Alma Mahler in the 1960s. All else has disappeared. There may have once been a kind of archive of other works in Dresden, but it would have burned in the fire-bombing of 1945.

Mahler wrote his piano quartet at the Vienna Conservatory when he was about fifteen years old. It bears the marks of composers whose works he must have been studying at least as much as it contains hints of his own compositions to come. Schubert song-writing seems to figure prominently at the opening, and it seems vaguely likely that Mahler may have been looking at Schumann's piano quartet — particularly the melodic contours of the third movement — as a reference. Also some of the Bach-style fugal writing seems like it might have been filtered through Schumann's works. But who knows? It was a long time ago, perhaps 1876, when Mahler wrote this. Much has happened since then, not all of it explicable. Mahler has been dead for 108 years, and there are no records.

Meanwhile, there is also, at the manuscript's end, a tiny fragment of a scherzo movement, which buzzes and spins, but seems uncertain in its direction.

This fragment becomes the starting point for Alfred Schnittke, who, to forge his own piano quartet, seems to have set the scherzo on fire, as though it were kindling. With distortions, reverberations, and curling-repeating motives, Mahler's student work is vaulted into the late 20th century, its 'scherzo' now a decidedly dark joke, if it's a joke at all. Schnittke's writing is a mix of decomposition, pastiche, and parody, and it treats Mahler's fragment with a desperate bitterness — only to remember at its very end that Mahler's work, however small and studious, once was a bit of something that it might turn, if all goes well, into symphony or song. Or not.

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

"The Shepherd on the Rock" (*Der Hirt auf dem Felsen*), D. 965 (1828)

We are seeing ever more of ourselves in the image of Narcissus, who stares, as we do, unceasingly into a dark mirror. As Narcissus' myth rises, perhaps that of Echo, his doomed and pining suitor, should find a wider hearing as well. Psychologically, physically, and musically, she brings with her a powerful set of ideas: resonance and reverberation; fullness and emptiness; companionship and isolation; present and past; creation and imitation; Self and Other. Her name means little more than 'sound', and she is everywhere.

Schubert's last completed work, the 'Shepherd on the Rock' is about echoes, and it is built from them. Even before the singer has a descriptive word to give, the clarinet seems to be singing from an Austrian mountain. Schubert's singer concentrates initially on the thrill of the echo — the sound of his own voice. But the undercurrent of longing proves stronger than acoustic interest. An echo is no answer; it is full of absence and distance. So the last word of each stanza is empty: 'Der Klüfte' (the cliff); 'Von unten' (from below); 'Hinüber' (over there). In the end, the reason for the singer to sing is not to hear his own voice, but to try to fill a void, or bridge a gap.

*Wenn auf dem höchsten Fels ich steh',
In's tiefe Tal hernieder seh',
Und singe.*

*Fern aus dem tiefen dunkeln Tal
Schwingt sich empor der Widerhall
Der Klüfte.*

*Je weiter meine Stimme dringt,
Je heller sie mir wieder klingt
Von unten.*

*Mein Liebchen wohnt so weit von mir,
Drum seh'n' ich mich so heiß nach ihr
Hinüber.*

So the music changes. The piano slows, the melodic lines flatten — and Schubert even switches poets. The first stanzas (above) are from Wilhelm Müller; the next stanzas (below) are from Karl August Varnhagen. In this new voice, the singer tells a longing sound in the night woods. The clarinet throws in occasional echoes, but they seem more empathic or psychological than the sound which had been leaping through the Alps.

*In tiefem Gram verzehr ich mich,
Mir ist die Freude hin,
Auf Erden mir die Hoffnung wich,
Ich hier so einsam bin.*

*So sehndend klang im Wald das Lied,
So sehndend klang es durch die Nacht,
Die Herzen es zum Himmel zieht
Mit wunderbarer Macht.*

Emotional rescue (in the third group of stanzas, again from Wilhelm Müller) comes not from the narrator reuniting with a distant beloved, but rather from a change in the singer's psychological perspective. The woods and cliffs become a fertile space in which to wander and seek rather than a space in which to lose oneself.

The loneliness of echoes is indeed an existential issue — not an issue not to be solved here, or perhaps ever, but worth raising, and worth singing toward. Some solace, in this case, comes from the change of the narrator's attention from reflection in sound toward motion in life. Nature thus shifts from being an echo chamber to being a source of drive, growth, and active seeking. And in the voice of the clarinet, what had been mere echoes are freed from the line of the singer, and made responses rather than mere copies.

*Der Frühling will kommen,
Der Frühling, meine Freud',
Nun mach' ich mich fertig*

Zum Wandern bereit

Perhaps this is why there is a clarinet in the mix. The independence and freedom of the clarinet mark a psychological move to the outside, away from the dark opening sound of the piano alone. The beloved 'other' seems more real — more than a mere echo. As for the distant beloved... one can only hope that he or she, if reachable at all, is not some sort of narcissist, lost in the emptiness of mere reflections.

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)
***Souvenir de Florence*, Op. 70, TH 118 (1890)**

After finishing *The Sleeping Beauty* in 1890 (which the Czar very nicely told him was 'very nice'), Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky went to Florence to write *The Queen of Spades*. He worked feverishly on the new opera, pretty well finished it, and then fell ill for a month. Exhausted from his musical efforts, he had little left to do in Florence. He met a street singer named Fernando; he went to see 'Buffalo Bill' Cody's *Wild West Show*; and finally, when he got bored in a general sort of way, he went to Rome. He had a good time there, and when he got back to St. Petersburg, he began to write *Souvenir de Florence*, a four-years-overdue commission from the St. Petersburg Chamber Music Society.

There is nothing particularly Florentine about *Souvenir de Florence*: no street-singer's tune, no ode to Michelangelo, no encoded *Duomo*-themed sno-globe. He simply wrote a sextet with a memory of Florence fresh in his mind and (perhaps) with a theme conceived in Florence as the seed for its second movement. It is a work full of drive, warmth, and lyric energy — and moreover, for late Tchaikovsky, a surprisingly gloomless result. Both its compositional and historical courses, however, show many of the vicissitudes of Being Tchaikovsky. He wrote at first that it was 'incredibly hard work', due to the 'six independent yet compatible voices'. Later he wrote 'My sextet is wonderful!'. Still later, after hearing it privately, he retrieved it to revise all that he felt was 'ill-sounding and unidiomatic'. Finally, after editing it for two years, he named it *Souvenir de Florence*, had it published, and witnessed a successful premiere with the noted violinist and pedagogue Leopold Auer leading the way. He is reported to have been quite pleased in hearing it, and quite pleased with himself for writing it.