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CLASSICS

LLŶR WILLIAMS
SCHUBERT
VOL.8

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Transcriptions by Franz Liszt

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INTRODUCTION

"In a word I feel myself the most unhappy and wretched creature in the world. Imagine a man whose health will never be right again, and who in sheer despair over this ever makes things worse and worse instead of better ...but I have tried my hand at several instrumental things ... in fact, I intend to pave the way towards a grand symphony in this manner."

These extracts from a letter of 1824 epitomise to me the paradox of Schubert, the manic-depressive composer. On the one hand his music has that world-weary element of profound grief - 'the most wretched creature in the world' - and on the other a life-affirming exuberance bordering on the manic that characterises the *Wanderer-Fantasie* and parts of the D major sonata D.850.

While Schubert's later piano music has a range of emotions that rivals Beethoven's last sonatas, in the beginning of his career he perhaps lacked the assurance of the older composer, and he was less fastidious about destroying sketches and fragments. As a result there are a large number of unfinished works and, therefore, the pianist has to make a decision about where to start the Schubert odyssey. Schubert himself made no effort to try and publish any of his sonatas before the great A minor D.845 of 1825. I decided to start slightly earlier with the B major of 1817 where one senses an assurance and

boldness of tonal experiment not found before in his piano music. Perhaps the three earliest sonatas (on Disc 6) manifest the journey into Schubert's maturity: two pieces of a generally sunny disposition followed by the A minor D.784, written shortly after he discovered he was suffering from syphilis and one of the most desolate of all his works.

My Schubert recitals at Cardiff also featured several of his Lieder as transcribed by Liszt which we have put together on CD 8. The transcription, especially that of 'great' music such as Schubert's remains one of the few genres that is still frowned upon by serious musicians even in the twenty-first century. I would urge these people to consider Schubert's own variations for flute and piano on '*Trockne Blumen*', one of the most profound songs in *Die schöne Müllerin*, and which he turns into one of the most outlandishly virtuosic things ever. Liszt's versions are often admirably restrained by comparison. The songs I have chosen tend to be either those where Liszt employs the full resources of his pianistic prowess to enhance the narrative - *Erlkönig*, *Die Forelle* - or those where he manages to turn the piano from percussive machine into the most glamorous of singing instruments - *Litanei*, *Ave Maria*.

Llŷr Williams, 2019

TRANSCRIPTIONS BY FRANZ LISZT

Franz Liszt's evangelising zeal for piano transcription generated a vast catalogue of works encompassing the Renaissance composer Jacob Arcadelt through to Liszt's compatriot Géza Zichy. Arrangements of operatic arias and overtures and entire symphonies were all grist to his mill, and of 150 songs Liszt transcribed, more than a third were by Schubert. Whilst most of these occupied him for some ten years from 1836, his admiration for the Viennese composer was lifelong. In addition to nearly sixty song transcriptions, Liszt made several orchestral arrangements, including the 'Wanderer' Fantasy, he directed the first performance of *Alfonso und Estrella* in 1854 and edited two volumes of Schubert's piano sonatas in 1880. His lieder were transformed into vividly reimagined concert pieces which brilliantly demonstrate Liszt's heightened response to poetic imagery and resourceful use of keyboard sonorities.

Das Wandern S. 565/1 and ***Der Müller und der Bach*** S. 565/2 belong to Liszt's pared down transcription of *Die Schöne Müllerin*. Devised in 1846, this assemblage of six songs in no way invalidates the emotional trajectory of Wilhelm Müller's love-sick miller whose romantic wanderings end permanently beneath the waters of the brook that has been his constant companion. Liszt faithfully renders the playful optimism of *Das Wandern* (The Wanderer), transcribing three of its five verses, adding arpeggio elaboration to the second and expanding pianistic textures in the third.

The joys of the open road vanish in the numbed despair of *Der Müller und der Bach* (The Miller and the Brook) where a heartbroken apprentice shares his grief with his watery confidante. Torment and consolation are perfectly caught here and following an ingeniously

fashioned third verse (marked *quasi Flauto*) Liszt extends the transcription to augment a plea for the brook to continue 'singing'.

Schubert's bravura ***Erkönig*** S. 558/4, the fourth of his *Zwölflieder* from 1838, would surely have appealed to Liszt's theatrical instincts and it became a much-requested recital piece for the virtuoso across Europe. The four characters of Goethe's text (narrator, terrified father, dying child and seductive erlking) are skilfully differentiated by adroit changes in register.

From the same collection comes ***Frühlingsglaube*** S. 558/7 originally written in 1821 to a text by the Tübingen poet and historian Ludwig Uhland. Translated as 'Faith in Spring', the song's poise reflects the promise of a benign change in nature that will banish all sadness. Its gentle melody transfers from the upper voice to the tenor register before a brief cadenza leads to a closing ritornello.

Setting a poem by Christian Friedrich Schubart, ***Die Forelle***, S. 563/6 (The Trout) is one of Schubert's most familiar songs and is performed here in an arrangement by Llŷr Williams who amalgamates Liszt's two 1846 transcriptions. Its vivid portrayal of the waterside scene and the luckless trout is given considerable elaboration.

Schubert's collection of songs known as ***Schwanengesang*** (Swan Song) was collected and published after his death by Tobias Haslinger, who wished to give the impression that Schubert had intended these songs as a cycle in the mode of *Die Schöne Müllerin* or *Winterreise*. Franz Liszt wrote piano transcriptions of these songs, rearranging the order, and published them in 1838-39. The four songs in this group are settings of poems by Ludwig Rellstab.

In **Ständchen** S. 560/7 (Serenade), the poet beckons his lover to him in the moonlight, aided by the song of the nightingales. The birds understand the heart's longing, and add their voices to that of the poet as he waits for his beloved.

In **Liebesbotschaft** S. 560/10 (Love's Message), the poet begs the brook to take a message of greeting to his beloved, and to refresh the flowers in her garden. The brook must comfort her as she dreams of her lover, and murmur a lullaby to her as she goes to sleep. The accompanying figure in this transcription shows the rippling of the brook.

Emotions and nature are superbly entwined in the theatrical **Aufenthalt** S. 560/3 (Resting Place). In this fifth song from *Schwanengesang*, chromatic flourishes darken further the troubled mood and the rustling treetops that smother the poet's cries in verse two are here amplified by its sonorous three-octave melody.

In **der Ferne** S. 560/6 (From Afar) calls down woe on the fugitive who flees his country, forgetting his homeland and his family. But it is clear that the fugitive is fleeing from love, and in the end he sends greetings from afar to his beloved.

In 1841 Liszt published a set of four *Geistliche Lieder* (Spiritual Songs) of which **Litaney auf das Fest aller Seelen**, S. 562/1 (Litany for All Souls Day) sets a devotional text by Johann Georg Jacobi. Whilst reducing Schubert's three verses to two, this transcription beautifully preserves the rapt mood of the 1816 original and perfectly encapsulates, especially in its octave doubling, Sigismund Thalberg's notion of 'the art of singing applied to the piano'.

Standchen S. 558/9 (Serenade) is a setting of Shakespeare's 'Hark, hark, the lark at heaven's gate sings' from *Cymbeline*. Schubert's song has the Deutsch catalogue number D. 889.

From **Winterreise** Liszt set 12 songs and rearranged their order, no doubt recognising many of the poet's emotions in words reflecting his own circumstances: an itinerant concert virtuoso travelling around Europe is not so far removed from the lonely wanderer making his way through Schubert's comfortless song cycle.

To poems by Wilhelm Müller (1794-1827) published in two volumes in 1824, Schubert produced *Winterreise* in 1827, when he had come close to breaking point. His friends, during one performance when Schubert sang 'in a voice wrought with emotion', were bewildered by the work's gloom. Franz von Schober, at whose house the songs were sung, declared his liking only for 'Der Lindenbaum', the most obviously 'tuneful' number in the collection. Conscious he had achieved something quite extraordinary even by his standards, Schubert reportedly replied: 'I like these songs better than any others, and you will come to like them as well'.

Winterreise concerns a solitary wanderer's hopeless love, whose sole company on his winter journey (excepting an organ grinder in the final song) is the howling of dogs, a scavenging crow and his own increasingly illusory observations as his mind unravels. Like the composer, the central isolated figure of *Winterreise* is no longer an innocent youth but one whose life has been blighted by experience.

In **Die Post** S. 561/4 the wanderer rejoices at the sounds of an approaching coach (galloping rhythms and fanfare figures) in the delusional belief that it carries a letter from his sweetheart. Under

the bare branches of **Der Lindenbaum** S. 561/7 (The Linden Tree) the wanderer dreams of a time when he had carved his sweetheart's name. The song's graceful melody glows with lost happiness to which Liszt applies a wealth of delicate ornamentation. Indeed, Liszt places all pianistic means possible at the service of expression, and such was the clarity of execution that one performance in 1839 drew from the Wiener Theaterzeitung the assertion, 'Performed the way we are hearing it played by Liszt, the songs truly do not need the text to be comprehended'.

Auf dem Wasser zu singen S. 558/12 is Liszt's transcription of Schubert's song setting of a poem by Friedrich Leopold, Graf zu Stolberg-Stolberg. The soul glides like a boat along the shimmering waves, while the sunset reddens the leaves of the trees. Time vanishes on dewy, radiant wings. Schubert's song setting is Op. 72, D. 774, and was written in 1823.

In **Du bist die Ruh** S. 558/3 (Thou art peace) Friedrich Rückert's verses suggest a sublime meditation on divine sleep. Liszt initially responds to Schubert's tender phrases with an inner stillness, before subsequent verses and the poet's pleas for deliverance unfold with increasing luminosity and mounting passion.

Ave Maria S. 558/12 (Ellens Gesang III) was Schubert's setting of Sir Walter Scott's 'Hymn to the Virgin' from his long poem *The Lady of the Lake*, in a translation by Storck which only loosely follows Scott's English text. The first verse (in Scott's original) reads:

*Ave Maria! maiden mild!
Listen to a maiden's prayer!
Thou canst hear though from the wild;*

*Thou canst save amid despair.
Safe may we sleep beneath thy care,
Though banish'd, outcast and reviled -
Maiden! hear a maiden's prayer;
Mother, hear a suppliant child!
Ave Maria!*

Altogether, Schubert set seven songs from *The Lady of the Lake*, in a song cycle Op. 52, of which 'Ave Maria' is No. 6, D. 839. Schubert's song was later adapted as a setting for the Latin hymn 'Ave Maria', recorded by, among others, the last Vatican castrato, Alessandro Moreschi, leaving the popular but false impression that Schubert himself had written it as a setting of the Latin text.

Notes by Simon Rees and David Truslove, 2017, 2018, 2019 & 2020

LLŶR WILLIAMS

Welsh pianist Llŷr Williams is widely admired for his profound musical intelligence and the expressive and communicative nature of his interpretations. He has worked with orchestras including the BBC National Orchestra of Wales, Scottish Chamber Orchestra, London Philharmonic Orchestra, London Symphony Orchestra, Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, BBC Philharmonic, Hallé Orchestra, Sinfonia Cymru, I Pomeriggi Musicali, Meininger Hofkapelle, Berner Kammerorchester, and the Mozarteum Orchestra in Salzburg. A regular performer in the Wigmore Hall's main piano series, Williams has also appeared at the BBC Proms in London, Gilmore International Keyboard Festival in the USA, Piano aux Jacobins in Toulouse and the Edinburgh International Festival. He is a regular performer at the East Neuk Festival in Scotland and is currently Artist-in-Association at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama and Artist-in-Residence at the Cowbridge Festival in Wales.

Williams is an acclaimed performer of Beethoven with several complete piano sonata cycles under his belt. Following a successful first cycle in Perth, Williams subsequently performed a complete cycle during an epic two-week marathon in Edinburgh that won him the prestigious South Bank Show Award. He later completed two cycles as a nine-recital project at the Wigmore Hall and the Royal Welsh College of Music & Drama in Cardiff between 2014 and 2017. In January 2017 he completed a successful collaboration with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra in performances of all five Beethoven piano concerti.

The 2018-19 season included his debut with the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra, and returns to the Royal Philharmonic and BBC National Orchestra of Wales as well as a highly successful Canadian recital debut at

Salle Bourgie in Montreal, with the critic of *Le Devoir* describing Williams as 'un secret trop bien gardé'. The 2019-20 season sees Llŷr Williams continuing his collaboration with the BBC National Orchestra of Wales in Beethoven's *Choral Fantasy*, as well as his debut with the Orchestre Symphonique de Bretagne. Williams also returned to the Edinburgh Festival in August 2019, while for the Beethoven anniversary season he will offer a complete sonata cycle at the Festival Cultural de Mayo in Guadalajara, Mexico and partial cycles in Moscow and Saint Petersburg.

Llŷr Williams' eclectic taste is reflected in his discography. April 2018 saw the release of 'Beethoven Unbound', a 12-CD Box set of the Wigmore Hall Beethoven cycle on Signum Records, which was BBC Music Magazine's 'Recording of the Month' in August 2018. His previous critically acclaimed CD, 'Wagner Without Words' reflects Williams' intimate relationship with operatic music. Other recordings by Williams include two solo albums for Signum, as well as William Mathias' second Piano Concerto with the BBC National Orchestra of Wales on Welsh label Tŷ Cerdd.

Born in Pentrebychan, North Wales, Llŷr Williams read music at The Queen's College, Oxford and went on to take up a postgraduate scholarship at the Royal Academy of Music where he won every available prize and award. He is also an Honorary Fellow of the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama, and in 2017 was awarded an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Wales. He was an active member of the Live Music Now! scheme for several years, was selected for the Young Concert Artists Trust in 2002. From 2003-2005 he was a BBC New Generation Artist and in 2004 received a Borletti-Buitoni Trust award.



Recorded live in concert at Dora Stoutzker Hall, Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama (Neuadd Dora Stoutzker, Coleg Brenhinol Cerdd a Drama Cymru) on 9th November 2017; 1st February, 3rd May and 11th October 2018; and 31st January 2019. Additional pieces recorded at Floating Earth Studios, London in February 2019.

Producer - Judith Sherman
Recording engineers - Mike Hatch, Mike Cox (October 2018)
Recording Assistant - George Collins (October 2018)
Post-production assistant - Jeanne Velonis
Stage managers - Chris Flavin, Devon Swayne, Jack Porter
Piano Technicians - Steve Baldwin, Kait Farbon, Kait Sullivan