

CD REVIEWS

Franz Schubert (1797–1828)

The Complete Songs

Soloists; Graham Johnson *pf*
Hyperion Records Limited

40 Compact Discs CDS44201/40

The Complete Songs, including piano-accompanied part-songs and ensembles (Discs 1–37), presented chronologically by composition plus three ‘bonus discs’ containing 81 songs by forty of ‘Schubert’s friends and contemporaries’.

Song texts, with English translations by Richard Wigmore; Introduction and Schubert calendar by Graham Johnson; Recordings remastered and re-ordered by Mark Brown; © Hyperion Records Limited, London 2005
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Discs 1–6

For a long while to come the name Graham Johnson, collaborative pianist extraordinaire, will be one lied enthusiasts think of with deep gratitude. What other word is there for an individual who has spent a lifetime in the service of song and whose accomplishments are so bountiful as to defy inventory? Within living memory one looks in vain for anyone except German baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau or the indefatigable lied pianist Gerald Moore (Johnson’s erstwhile teacher together with Geoffrey Parsons) who has done more for German song, whether in live or recorded performances. In collaboration with Hyperion Records – an association fostered by the late Ted Perry – Johnson has almost completed recording all of the lieder of Schumann, including not only those by Robert but also Clara, as well as a goodly number by Felix Mendelssohn, Richard Wagner, Johannes Brahms, Hugo Wolf and Richard Strauss. To this there also is his dedication to French song, one documented by numerous recordings (some on labels other than Hyperion) of the lyric creations of Georges Bizet, Emmanuel Chabrier, Ernest Chausson, Henri Duparc, Gabriel Fauré, César Franck, Charles Gounod, Reynaldo Hahn, Edouard Lalo, Francis Poulenc and Maurice Ravel, as well as those by composers from his adopted land (he was born in Rhodesia and came to Great Britain in 1967), among them Benjamin Britten, Gustav Holst, Henry Purcell, Roger Quilter and Ralph Vaughan Williams, plus numerous forays into the songs of Antonín Dvořák, Leoš Janáček, Franz Liszt, Modest Mussorgsky, Sergei Rachmaninoff and Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky. (Long although this list is, it nonetheless is selective.)

The above notwithstanding, Johnson’s legacy will rest on one epic achievement: his recordings of all of Franz Schubert’s more than 600 lieder. As Johnson observes

in his 'An accompanist's memories' (included in the book accompanying the series reviewed here), it took as much time to commit these songs to CD as it did for Schubert to compose them. Eighteen years, 37 discs and 60 singers later, the result is nothing less than astounding. More often than not overused, this last word is wholly deserved – and not just because the Hyperion Schubert Edition satisfies the collector's zeal for completeness. While no mean feat, in itself this attribute would be incentive for partial praise. Thus it is a pleasure to state that while there are many reasons to laud this series, the most important is marvellous performances that never fail to move, instruct or inspire.

No less compelling, the venture allows listeners to follow Schubert's career as a lied composer according to what likely is the most thorough attempt at correct chronology. I write 'most thorough' for, as Johnson affirms at the start of his introductory memoir (p. iv), 'despite advances in Schubertian scholarship ... work-order is a problem that will neither be solved entirely nor to everyone's satisfaction'. While many may dismiss this concern as fatally fetishistic, the issue is one about which scholars have expended considerable energy. As a rule, the reasons why have been sound. Assembling a chronology of a composer's work is central to establishing the historical context within which to understand that music. Doing this for Schubert's lieder makes it possible to map out his compositional development and ponder the impact of poetry on that development. Attending to both allows for a comparatively longer view than what obtains when one examines song from the vantage point of musical processes alone. Such a framework considers the lied as a melding of music and poetry, while also uncovering the influence of previous composers on Schubert and how his songs stimulated, or did not, those after him.

Although it was possible to traverse Schubert's lieder chronologically in the Hyperion Schubert Edition's first issue (hereafter HSE1; HSE2 for the reissue), doing so would have been time-consuming given the series' ordering according to topic, specific poet or song cycle. Turning to so otherwise respected a source as the lieder volumes of the *Neue Schubert-Ausgabe* (1968–2002) would have exacerbated the task, as the editors hived off the some 200 songs Schubert saw through publication in the first five volumes, while those posthumously issued tag along afterwards in nine more. The policy of ghettoizing songs not published during the composer's lifetime, almost always criticized in reviews of the NSA lieder volumes, not only makes studying the songs in their compositional sequence taxing, it props up a pecking order perhaps at odds with anything Schubert envisioned.¹ (Such a publication sequence also guarantees an extended future for the first critical edition of Schubert's collected works, the *Kritische durchgesehene Gesamtausgabe* [Breitkopf und Härtel, 1884–97].) HSE2 actively encourages listening to the songs in their order of composition. Disc 1 begins with Schubert's first attempt, the sketch *Lebenstraum*, D. 1a, while disc 37 concludes with *Die Taubenpost*, D. 957, from October 1828. But this is not the end: three CDs follow devoted to 81 lieder by 40 of Schubert's friends and contemporaries, an anthology ranging from the otherwise obscure Carl Banck (1809–89) to the better-known, albeit too-frequently maligned, Carl Friedrich Zelter (1758–1832).

Taking advantage of the opportunity to ponder Schubert's songs in the order he wrote them makes for an exhilarating experience. This especially is so with the first six discs of HSE2, which include 109 vocal works, from the aforementioned

¹ For an opposing view, see Walther Dürr, 'Die Lieder-Serie der Neuen Schubert-Ausgabe. Zu Schuberts Ordnung eigener Lieder', *Musica* 40 (1986): 28–30.

D. 1a, dating perhaps from 1810, to D. 210, *Die Liebe*, written 3 June 1815. Needless to say, 'exhilaration' is not the word most readers, taking their cue from the mainstream of Schubert criticism, would use to describe the composer's earliest lyric efforts. The following quotations provide a partial explanation. According to Hans Gál, the Schubert lied emerges 'like an eruption. ... No discernible path leads towards it; the works of others before him have as little clear relationship to it as have his own previous attempts.'² For Charles Rosen the matter is decidedly oedipal.³ After Schubert's 'first tentative experiments, the principles on which most of his songs are written are almost entirely new; they are related to the *Lieder* of the past only by negation: they annihilate all that precedes'.⁴ Moving systematically through HSE2, it is not until the fifty-first song (disc 4, track 5) that one comes upon *Gretchen am Spinnrade*, composed 19 October 1814 and first published in 1821 as Op. 2. As music history students know, not only is this Schubert's first setting of a Goethe poem it also is the one song everyone agrees is its composer's breakthrough work. On this date he becomes the 'father' of German song, establishing the genre as 'an autonomous musical form', his 'greatest achievement'.⁵

Yet this view leaves the songs before *Gretchen am Spinnrade* in a musical no-man's-land, forcing the question: what aspect of Schubert's early songs required 'negation'? There is more. Even allowing for the four fragments and five vocal works set not to German texts but rather Italian (exercises with Salieri), the 41 works before *Gretchen am Spinnrade* are not the only ones consigned to artistic and analytic limbo – a fair number of Schubert lieder composed after his eruptive encounter with Goethe also have provoked misgivings. (NSA volumes 10 and 11 include a convenient array of works in this last category. Most date from 1816–17 and, by and large, are settings of poems not by the sage of Weimar but the 'sweetly sentimental' verse of Hölty, Matthisson and Salis-Seewis.⁶) Understanding what amounts to a mythic prerequisite – on the one hand, that Schubert's *Gretchen am Spinnrade* is its composer's watershed work and, on the other, that setting only a poet of Goethe's stature satisfies the myth's heroic trajectory – got a lot easier thanks to HSE2's chronological arrangement. To this, the belief in progress, another all-embracing concept from Schubert's day, also plays a part. Bearing all of this in mind, an 1859 article published in a German-language music periodical makes for unsurprising reading: 'the Schubert song is – like the Goethe poem, the Beethoven symphony, and the Shakespeare drama – a *unicum*. That is to say, the essence of the particular art form achieves its highest and purest appearance in the works of these masters. Schubert's *Lieder* cannot ... be imitated; any more than can a Beethoven symphony.'⁷ Although the article's

² Hans Gál, *Franz Schubert oder die Melodie*, rev. edn (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1992): 59; all translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

³ See, further, Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁴ Charles Rosen, *The Classical Style* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1972): 454.

⁵ John Reed, *Schubert, The Master Musicians* (London: Dent, 1987): 31.

⁶ The assessment – one intended to disparage – is by Schubert's first biographer, Heinrich Kreissle von Hellborn, *Franz Schubert* (Vienna: C. Gerold's Sohn, 1865; reprint, Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1978): 496.

⁷ 'Die Lied- und Gesangskomposition: Das Schubertsche Lied', *Signale für die musikalische Welt* 17 (1859): 33; quoted from Christopher H. Gibbs, 'Introduction: the elusive Schubert', *The Cambridge Companion to Schubert* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997): 9. The translation is Gibbs's.

author (identified only as C.D.) stresses the singularity of the Schubert song and its resistance to replication, the comparisons are no less illuminating, just as is the insistence that Schubert's lieder represent the genre's 'highest and purest' attainment. Schubert's songs stand on a par with the titan Beethoven's efforts on behalf of the leading variety of nineteenth-century instrumental music just as they do the stage works of 'The Immortal Bard'. Most importantly there is the link between Schubert and Goethe.

Thus the story goes that Schubert invents the lied *ex nihilo* just as Goethe before him does the same thing for German letters. So ingrained are these attitudes that an alternative view has had little chance. Yet an alternative view is necessary, for Goethe is no less the lone progenitor of German verse than Schubert is the 'father' of the lied. To insist that the history of German song begins with either Goethe or Schubert's first of 71 Goethe settings is to turn history on its head. Doing so ignores Schubert's debt to his tuneful forerunners and his development as a lied composer.

Getting history off of its head requires nothing less than a critical reorientation, one where the expressive concentration and compressed scale of a song such as *Gretchen am Spinnrade*, lasting just under four minutes, finds a place alongside Schubert's initial interest in an altogether different species of song. In contrast to a work such as Beethoven's Ninth, with its 'wildly noisy colossal' finale that demands of those who listen to it 'superhuman' concentration,⁸ what those who value only the first of these two approaches to the lied prize above all is an aesthetic that maximizes the minimal. Interestingly, it is the Schubert lieder not conforming to this paradigm that have fallen through the cracks, many written during his earliest years as a song composer and which antedate *Gretchen am Spinnrade*. Some statistics will help. Assuming the date for D. 1a is correct, the 13-year-old Schubert began work as a song composer by turning to a 221-line poem by Gabriele von Baumberg.⁹ That encounter, while yielding only a sketch (fleshed out on HSE2 by Reinhard van Hoorickx), is a draft that attains the heavenly length of almost 13 minutes. *Hagars Klage* (D. 5), written on 30 March 1811, the composer's first completed lied, is a setting of a poem tipping in at 74 lines, or 386 words, and, as realized by Schubert, lasts over 16 minutes. *Leichenfantasie*, D. 7, the next song, also from 1811, lasts 19 minutes. The poet who inspires the 14-year-old to compose this epic *Sturm und Drang* ballad is Schiller. The author of *Don Carlos* triggers another larger-than-life ballad, the almost 25-minute *Der Taucher*, D. 111, a work Schubert took up twice: in 1813 and again in 1814. Two 1815 songs – *Der Liedler*, D. 209, at over 15 minutes and *Minona oder die Kunde der Dogge*, D. 152, at 11 – likewise are drawn out. (HSE2 volume 7 includes another Schiller setting, *Die Bürgschaft*, D. 246, lasting more than 16 minutes.) To reject such works as 'first tentative experiments' or merely ballads is to substitute taxonomy for understanding. Although Schubert eventually abandoned texts of so extraordinary a length, the fact that he did does not let musicology off the hook. Before he hit on compressed containment it clearly was poetic magnitude he valued instead of the (presumed) unity and expressive

⁸ *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* 28 (27 December 1826): 853–4; translation adapted from David Benjamin Levy, 'Early Performances of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony: A Documentary Study of Five Cities' (Ph.D. dissertation, Eastman School of Music, 1979): 363–4.

⁹ Susan Youens, *Schubert's Poets and the Making of Lieder* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), devotes her first chapter to "'The Sappho of Vienna": Gabriele von Baumberg and the Disasters of War': 1–50.

coherence resulting from the former. Given Schiller's role, one is tempted to call this Schubert's Schillerian sublime, the sublime an artistic category contemplated by Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant to be sure, but a philosophical concept German writers – such as Johann Georg Sulzer, in his encyclopaedia of aesthetics – lauded as 'the highest thing there is in art'. For Sulzer, the sublime 'should be resorted to only when the psyche is to be attacked with forceful jolts, when admiration, awe, powerful longing, lofty courage, or even fear or terror are to be aroused The sublime invariably arouses astonishment by its size.'¹⁰ Schiller confronted what he termed 'the sensuously infinite' on two occasions, first in a short essay from 1793, 'Vom Erhabenen' (On the Sublime), and another published in 1801, 'Über das Erhabene' (Concerning the Sublime). In the latter he argues that the quest for Enlightenment, or the self-cultivation Germans call *Bildung*, depends on the union of opposites, be they head and heart or the earthy here and now and boundless up above. 'The sublime', Schiller insists, 'must complement the beautiful in order to make aesthetic education into a complete whole and to enlarge the perceptive capacity of the human heart to the full extent of our vocation.'¹¹

Was the teenage Schubert interested, much less versed, in *Aufklärung* thought? If yes, is it possible he just as quickly turned to the more familiar method of song composition, one that maximizes the minimal, as his solution, through the medium of music, of achieving Schiller's 'aesthetic education'? To presume to answer this question now would be premature since more research is necessary. Whatever the answers to these questions, I hope my hypothesis is not deemed outlandish. It may appear to be that on first inspection, but, I assert, it is no less off-centre than the view that all lieder not conforming to the model of *Gretchen am Spinnrade* are second-rate. What seems beyond dispute is that before Schubert conceived the method of song composition history acknowledges as his, his song career began very differently. How to explain that initial path? Was it motivated by youthful excess, the juvenile fascination with the nail-biting Gothic horror of funeral fantasies (that is, *Leichenphantasie*), or the desire to make an impressive start in a genre previously seen as the musical equivalent of small change? Even when Schubert submits to condensed expressivity, as for example with standard-issue strophic form, brevity is not always his ultimate aim, a fact that blurs the boundaries between the supposedly mutually exclusive approaches to the Lied upon which history has insisted. The composer's 1815 setting of Schiller's 'An die Freude' sheds light on this issue. When Schiller first published the poem in 1786 he did so with nine strophes numbering 108 lines, or 490 words; when the poet revised the poem for his 1803 *Gedichte von Friederich Schiller, Zweyter Theil*, he trimmed it to eight strophes comprising 96 lines. The *Gesammtausgabe* published Schubert's setting with eight strophes yet Thomas Allen and Johnson (disc 6, track 10) – and a winning performance it is – provide only the first two. Mathematics clarifies the point. In Allen and Johnson's recording the song lasts two minutes; to add the remaining six strophes would swell the song to eight minutes. Schubert's attraction to long strophic poems does not end here, a fact

¹⁰ Johann Georg Sulzer, *Allgemeine Theorie der Schönen Künste in einzelnen, nach alphabetischer Ordnung der Kunstwörter aufeinanderfolgenden, Artikeln abgehandelt*, 2nd enlarged edn (Leipzig: Weidmannschen Buchhandlung, 1793; reprint, Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1967), 2: 97–8.

¹¹ Friedrich Schiller, 'Über das Erhabene', *Schillers Werke: Nationalausgabe*, ed. Benno von Wiese (Weimar: Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1963), 21: 52.

corroborating the notion that Schubert at his containable best is not necessarily succinct. Similarly, the *Gretchen am Spinnrade* league invariably insists – and they in part are right – that Schubert treats voice and piano as equals. In doing so, while the voice syllabically weaves its plaint after Faust abandons Gretchen, the keyboard penetrates to the level of human psychology, the incessant semiquaver figuration mirroring the young woman's unhinged emotional state and imitating the spinning wheel, the latter both occupational therapy and a crucial clue to her modest social background, of which Faust takes advantage. In a certain sense, the veneration of *Gretchen am Spinnrade*, infinitely reasonable although it is, has obscured the fact that composers before Schubert wrote keyboard parts in every way the equal of his 1814 song. Momentarily looking beyond Schubert's epoch-making lied one discovers it was the ballad that provided first poets – Gellert, Gleim, Zachariae, Hölty, Stolberg, Bürger, Goethe and Schiller – and then composers with a ready-made medium to experiment and to move beyond prevailing strictures. (A short list of composers includes F.L.A. Kunzen, Zelter, Zumsteeg, Václav Tomášek, Schubert and Loewe.) Looking beyond the oftentimes effusive experimentation of declamatory vocal lines and multi-sectional, through-composed forms, the ballad encouraged composers to elevate the keyboard to a previously unheard of position. Was this a necessary stage for Schubert, one that, after distillation, led to the elegant equipoise of *Gretchen am Spinnrade*? If we continue to delude ourselves that German song and Schubert's contribution to it begins with *Gretchen am Spinnrade*, meaningful answers will never get very far.

The first six discs of HSE2 surely will stimulate other questions just as they spawn additional observations. In the latter category, although some readers will (wrongly) assume I have some deep-seated enmity against *Gretchen am Spinnrade*, I wish to make clear that no performance fails to deeply affect me. How ironic, then, that I am not won over by Marie McLaughlin's. Too often her voice is rhythmically and emotionally unfocused, especially at climatic moments. The mounting harmonic intensity from F major to B_♭ major (bars 54–64) that Schubert builds into the song as Gretchen recalls Faust's various physical attributes ranging from his proud demeanour to enchanting speech is world famous. Most disquieting of all is the memory of his kiss, to which Schubert responds with an earth-shattering dominant-ninth chord (bar 69). All of this finds McLaughlin and Johnson unconvincing, so much so that first-time listeners may be forgiven for wondering what all the fuss is about. Elsewhere, however, performances of the calibre of Brigitte Fassbaender's delicate yet spell-binding *Der Geistertanz*, D. 116, Janet Baker's wondrous and richly hued *Schäfers Klage*, D. 121 (first version), or Elly Ameling's enthralling and ethereal *Die Sterbende*, D. 186, will inspire a new generation of singers just as they possess the potential to rouse music scholars towards greater nuance of understanding. If HSE2 contained only one early song, Christine Brewer (in marvellous voice) and Johnson's passionate performance of *Hagars Klage* provides a gripping musical argument casting doubt over the view that the young composer was in any way 'tentative'. (The ensuing *Leichenfantasie*, despite many striking details presaging things to come, rambles on so long as to strain even the most sympathetic listener.) What a joy to be reminded of Margaret Price's exquisite voice and unerring musicality, both of which are in evidence in her glowing account of *Der Mondabend*, D. 141. Too, it is a pleasure to report that Adrian Thompson's reading of *Nachtgesang*, D. 119, Schubert's second encounter with Goethe, goes far in making the case that it runs a close second to the Goethe setting preceding it by a little more than a month.

It would be easy to continue extolling these performances and the insights they stand to incite. In ceding now to the reviewers of the 34 remaining discs, I applaud Johnson and his band of marvellous singers for serving Schubert well. But they have done more. Despite enormous recent progress, the walls that too often have divided musical performance and scholarship in the past still stand. HSE2 lays down an imposing gauntlet. Above, I barely scratched the surface of a number of issues awaiting further scrutiny. Hyperion deserves our gratitude; backed by the vision (and bankbook) of Ted Perry and magnificently presided over by Graham Johnson, the full measure of their gift only partially has begun to sink in.

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Discs 7–12

Some 50 years after Franz Schubert's death Johannes Brahms told his composition student Gustav Jenner: 'There is no song by Schubert from which one cannot learn something'.¹ The Hyperion Schubert *Complete Songs* offers the welcome chance to test this statement, especially in respect of songs that have not generally received much critical attention and have been unable to secure an established place in the lied recital repertoire (apropos of which, as Graham Johnson has noted, 'the public has always been content to hear the well-known Schubert songs again and again').

These six CDs contain a total of 133 lieder dating from the beginning of June 1815 to the end of February 1816, giving cause for contemplation of Schubert's sheer productivity as well as astonishment at his 18-year-old achievement in, frequently, the depth of his poetic interpretation. As Graham Johnson reminds us, it is on account of this remarkable production that 1815 has been dubbed 'an *annus mirabilis* in the history of song'. The chronological arrangement of the Hyperion reissue was an excellent idea. Among other benefits, it enables such well-known songs as the delicately poised setting of Goethe's 'Heidenröslein' (19 August 1815) and the intensely dramatic 'Erlkönig' (?October 1815) to take their place in the context of Schubert's lieder of the period generally, and in the context of his settings of the particular poet concerned. Thus 'Heidenröslein' (CD 9, track 5, performed by Patricia Rozario) and 'Erlkönig' (CD 10, track 15 with vocal trio and 11, track 14, solo version with Sarah Walker), form part of a whole group of Schubert's early Goethe settings featured on these discs, beginning with 'Jägers Abendlied' D. 215 (June 1815), sung by Simon Keenlyside on CD 7, track 8, and including 'Erster Verlust' D. 226, from the following month (performed by Janet Baker: CD 7, track 17). I personally did not take so well to the multiple-voiced version of 'Erlkönig', finding Sarah Walker's solo rendering much more focused and less distracting, yet vividly contrasted in register and tone-colour among the different characters and moods. For me this supported the notion that in art metaphorical representation often works better than a more 'realistic' effect.

Many, although not all, of these songs were chosen by Schubert to send in the famous and ill-fated package to Goethe in 1816. The Goethe songs on the discs also include two items from Schubert's setting of the Singspiel *Claudine von Villa Bella*,

¹ Quoted in John Daverio, *Crossing Paths: Schubert, Schumann, and Brahms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002): 4.