

CD REVIEW

Decades: A Century of Song

Ludwig van Beethoven, et al, *Decades: A Century of Song. Vol. 1, 1810–1820*

Michael Schade *ten*, Lorna Anderson *sop*, Sylvia Schwartz *sop*, Ann Murray *mezzo*, Florian Boesch *bar*, Malcolm Martineau *pf*
Vivat 112, 2016 (1 CD: 78 minutes)

Vincenzo Bellini, et al, *Decades: A Century of Song. Vol. 2, 1820–1830*

Anush Hovhannisyan *sop*, Sarah Connolly *mezzo*, John Mark Ainsley *ten*, Robin Tritschler *ten*, Luis Gomes *ten*, Christopher Maltman *bar*, Malcolm Martineau *pf*
Vivat 114, 2017 (1 CD: 79 minutes)

Alexander Alyabyev, et al, *Decades: A Century of Song. Vol. 3, 1830–1840*

Soraya Mafi *sop*, Lorna Anderson *sop*, Angelika Kirchschrager *mezzo*, John Mark Ainsley *ten*, Alexey Gusev *bass*, Malcolm Martineau *pf*
Vivat 116, 2018 (1 CD: 69 minutes)

When we turn on a satellite radio channel, Pandora station or Spotify playlist with a name like ‘Sounds of the 1960s’, we have a reasonable idea of what to expect: certain characteristic aspects of musical style, instrumentation, subject matter and lyrical turns of phrase, not to mention the signature vocal and/or instrumental personalities of the decade’s most iconic performers. But what would happen if we organized nineteenth-century European art song in the same way? Would ‘Sounds of the 1860s’ be a similarly coherent radio format, and if so, what insights into that decade’s songs might emerge if we gave it a listen?

Anyone interested in this thought experiment would do well to spend some time with *Decades: A Century of Song*, a new recording series on the VIVAT label created and curated by the pianist Malcolm Martineau, who also accompanies all the performances. Based on Martineau’s 2010–12 recital series for Wigmore Hall, ‘Decade by Decade: 100 Years of German Song’, *Decades: A Century of Song* now expands the scope of the programming to include the rest of continental Europe and Russia as well. Each disk in the series is devoted to songs composed during a single decade of the nineteenth century; beginning in 2016, the first three decades have been released at the rate of one disc per year. (It should be noted that the initial disc in the series actually covers the 1810s, presumably because this allows Schubert to be included in the project’s debut instalment.) All the singers joining Martineau on this adventure are either art song luminaries or major emerging talents, and Susan Youens, who is also listed as a project consultant, provides liner notes that offer a bit of context and interpretation for each

decade, composer and song. With such a powerhouse team of collaborators, it is no wonder that the volumes that have appeared so far are never anything less than a supreme pleasure to listen to and contemplate.

In volume 1, 1810–1820, art song is not yet fully recognizable as a category unto itself. The works chosen for this volume reveal a genre of unstable identity informed by a complex tangle of varied influences. Prominent among these is folk song (real or imagined), represented most obviously on the disc by three of Fernando Sor's pithy *seguidillas boleras*, which Brian Jeffery has suggested may actually be arrangements of preexisting Spanish popular songs rather than original compositions.¹ Meanwhile, the noble tunefulness of sentimental French *romances* by Joseph Dominique Fabry-Garat and Giovanni Battista Viotti, reminiscent of Gluck, is emblematic not only of the milieu of the salon, but also of the impact of opera, where the same genre was often heard on the public stage. Weber's 'Abschied vom Leben', a poignant setting of the war hero Theodor Körner's poetic vision as he lay dying on the battlefield, is a touching operatic cavatina of sorts in ternary form, replete with a heartrending cantabile melody, rolling arpeggios, pulsating chords and quasi-orchestral interludes.

Volume 1 literally begins and ends with Schubert, however; two sets of his songs from 1815–18 comprise half of the disk's 32 tracks. In the context of the rest of the volume, the connections linking Schubert's songs with folk-song ideals, the social dynamics of the salon, and operatic musical conventions are revealed anew. Hearing 'Wer kauft Liebesgötter?' at the very end of the volume, for example, we are more apt to notice the playful, teasing irony of Goethe's text, the catchy accessibility of Schubert's strophic setting, and the nods that both text and music make to Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte*. More famous songs like 'Ganymed' and 'Der Fischer' emerge in a new light as well, the former as a kind of Italian aria structure (cantabile, tempo di mezzo, cabaletta), the latter as a narrative salon song meant to arouse conversation about its mysterious conclusion. Juxtaposed against Schubert's synthesis of contemporary trends, the three songs by Beethoven included in this volume (especially 'Wonne der Wehmut') seem especially idiosyncratic and in a world of their own, with their unique dialectic between instrumental thematic logic and vocal melodic inspiration.²

For volume 2, Martineau's selections from the 1820s reflect the nostalgic melancholy of the Restoration, with many songs focused on nameless yearning for an idealized, unrecoverable past. In the first two of Ellen's songs from Schubert's settings of poetry from Walter Scott's *Lady of the Lake*, Ellen enjoins the hunter to rest from battle and indulge in an enchanted sleep; in the context of three of Schubert's Mayrhofer songs ('Aus Heliopolis I', 'Auflösung', and 'Gondelfahrer'), the Scott settings take on a quintessentially Biedermeier attitude of cozy resignation in the face of impotence in the political domain. Similarly, in another Scott setting based on a very loose translation from the author's narrative poem *Rokeby*, Glinka's 'Moya harfa' praises the consolations of art after the loss of youth and fatherland. Musically, the disk underscores the ways in which *bel canto* in the

¹ Brian Jeffrey, Introduction to *Fernando Sor: Seguidillas for Voice and Piano or Guitar*, ed. Brian Jeffrey (London: TECLA Editions, 1976), available online at <https://tecla.com/fernando-sor/sor-seguidillas-introduction-by-brian-jeffery>.

² For an analysis of 'Wonne der Wehmut' along these lines, see William Kinderman, *Beethoven* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995): 140–45.

1820s had become a stylistic *lingua franca*. In his three ariettas, Bellini comes across as an Italian Schubert, with strong psychological readings of his largely Romantic texts that are, however, filtered through his own operatic melodic rhetoric.³ Schubert's setting of Ellen's third song, the famous 'Ave Maria', becomes a *bel canto* masterpiece in this company, while his 'Der Winterabend' reveals how thoroughly he had internalized *bel canto* melody in the service of fine-grained textual interpretation by the end of his life.

It is harder to find common ground among the songs in volume 3, but this may also be a function of the fact that neither Schubert nor any other single composer dominates the selected repertoire. A new theme for this volume is the idea of song as a domestic window into grander performances on public stages. Meyerbeer's sparkling setting of Joseph Méry's 'La fille de l'air', a poem dedicated to the great ballerina Marie Taglioni that evokes her performance in the title role of *La Sylphide* (1832), conjures the world of the ballet.⁴ The performance traditions of concertizing opera divas are captured and made accessible by Alexander Alyabyev's 'Chto poyosh', *krasa-devitsa*. On her Russian concert tour of 1830, renowned German soprano Henriette Sontag impressed audiences by adding coloratura embellishments to Alyabyev's beloved parlour song 'Solovey, moy solovey', initiating a trend; two years later, the poet Vasily Domontovich depicted the Russian soprano Anna Lebedeva's coloratura performance of 'Solovey' in 'Chto poyosh', and two years after that, Alyabyev set this poem himself, placing Sontag's coloratura cadenzas in the song's piano interludes.⁵ The salon environment is also a vivid presence on this disk, represented by songs of Fanny Hensel and Felix Mendelssohn that would have been heard at Hensel's Berlin *Sonntagsmusiken*, as well as French and Russian romances by Berlioz, Alyabyev and Alexander Dargomizhsky.

The promotional material for the *Decades* series pitches these recordings as a helpful teaching tool, and to my mind, the greatest pedagogical potential of the series lies in its inclusion of many songs by lesser-known composers whose texts were set much more famously by others, creating the opportunity for some useful and provocative comparisons. In Franz Lachner's Heine settings in volume 3, for example, the poet's ironic ambiguities of tone and message come across much differently than in Schubert's settings from *Schwanengesang*. The turbulent middle section of Lachner's setting of 'Du schönes Fischermädchen' makes it clear why the fisher-maiden might fear the poet's advances despite the seductive folksiness of his rhetoric, whereas one would have to bend over backwards (as some musicologists have done) to hear any such psychological darkness in Schubert's setting. In Heine's 'Ich stand in dunklen Träumen', after the poet stares at his beloved's

³ The liner notes attribute the text of Bellini's 'Vanne, o rosa fortunata' to Metastasio, but there is no evidence I can find to confirm Metastasio's authorship. Instead, the author was almost certainly Davide Bertolotti, a journalist, editor, poet and historical novelist who published the poem under his own name in his magazine *Lo spettatore italiano* in 1817. See *Lo spettatore italiano* 8/2 (1817): 70. Bellini resided in Milan in the late 1820s when these ariettas were composed, and he may have met Bertolotti at that time.

⁴ Méry's dedication can be found in his *Poésies Intimes: Mélodies* (Paris: Michel Lèvy Frères, 1864): 118. Taglioni had also been the star of the 'ballet of the nuns' in Meyerbeer's *Robert le diable* in 1831.

⁵ See Anne Marie Weaver, 'The Soprano and the Nightingale: Aleksandr Alyabyev's "Solovey"', *Journal of Musicological Research* 35/1 (2016): 23–44.

portrait, does his final exclamation – ‘I cannot believe that I have lost you’ – imply that he has indeed lost her, as Schubert’s minor-mode postlude suggests, or is it to be taken literally, implying instead that he could not possibly have lost her, as Clara Schumann’s brighter conclusion seems to argue?⁶ Especially alongside these two opposing compositional interpretations, Lachner’s setting falls somewhere in the middle and would provide fodder for a spirited conversation about the ultimate implications of this challenging poem. The similarities between Loewe’s powerful ‘Erlkönig’, included in volume 2 (it was published in 1827), and Schubert’s familiar setting are uncanny, especially because Loewe composed his ‘Erlkönig’ three or four years before Schubert published his own in 1821. On the other hand, the three *Frauenliebe und Leben* songs by Loewe offered in volume 3 are relatively conservative in style and remarkably similar to one another; they will perhaps disappoint anyone familiar with Robert Schumann’s version of Chamisso’s poetic cycle. In the perennial debate about this cycle’s gender dynamics, Loewe’s songs furnish us with a thought-provoking yardstick against which to assess Schumann’s own perspective on this material (and vice versa).

The four Goethe songs by Václav Jan Tomášek included in volume 1 make for fascinating comparisons with Schubert’s relatively contemporaneous settings. Tomášek’s through-composed ‘Nähe des Geliebten’ musically illustrates each of the poem’s varied landscape images, whereas Schubert compresses that dynamism into a folk-like strophic form, as Walter Frisch once argued.⁷ Similarly, Tomášek’s ‘An die Entfernte’ is a dramatic *scena*, replete with a piano introduction that suggests the poet bursting into the beloved’s room and anxiously searching for her only to conclude that she has fled from him; Schubert’s ternary-form setting has a more reflective ambience and effect. When Schubert’s opening strains return to the words ‘all my songs call to you’, we understand that these include the very song we are hearing right now. The foil of Tomášek’s Goethe songs reveals how Schubert was unusually inclined to write songs that are aware of themselves as such – that is, his songs often make self-conscious reference to their own phenomenal existence as songs. Schubert’s ‘Im Frühling’ and Louis Niedermeyer’s setting of Lamartine’s ‘Le Lac’, both found in volume 2, demonstrate this strategy in the service of the same basic scenario. In both songs, the protagonist visits a beautiful landscape at the very same time of the year in which he had previously spent happy hours with his beloved, wishing that his vivid present experience of the landscape would somehow bring those hours back from the past. In ‘Im Frühling’, composed in varied strophic form, the protagonist’s wish to remain on the hillside as a bird on a branch singing about his beloved is fulfilled (at least in an imaginative sense) as he sings those words in the song’s last refrain, while ‘Le Lac’ is a lengthy through-composed work whose final three stanzas are set as a self-standing strophic song, indicating a protagonist who ultimately recaptures his memory of amorous lakeside bliss through the pleasure of singing that song.

To conclude I want to return to the one thing that will always be missing from Martineau’s romp through the decades of the nineteenth century: the sound of the

⁶ David Lewin explores both settings along these lines in *Studies of Music with Text* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); see Chapter 6, ‘Ihr Bild’ (135–52), and Chapter 7, ‘Clara Schumann’s Setting of “Ich Stand”’ (153–60).

⁷ See Walter Frisch, ‘Schubert’s “Nähe des Geliebten” (D. 162): Transformation of the Volkston’, in *Schubert: Critical and Analytical Studies*, ed. Walter Frisch (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986): 175–99.

nineteenth century itself. Unlike twentieth-century pop radio, where contemporaneous recordings of songs by the original artists are the norm, the *Decades* project can only hope to give us cover versions, as it were. In that regard, it is striking that the singers on these three albums – all consummately professional concert artists, in contrast to the wild variety of singers who would have indulged in this repertoire in the nineteenth century itself – do not experiment with any historical performance practices. Strophic songs, for example, receive no embellishment or ornamentation in the manner of Johann Michael Vogl singing Schubert,⁸ and none of the singers use melodramatic recitation in any of the narrative ballads, as Loewe himself was known to do in concert (and as Brigitte Fassbaender did at the end of her 1988 recording of Loewe's *Frauenliebe und Leben*).⁹ With all that in mind, we can and should revel in the stunning achievements of these performers today, as a reflection of the decade in which we live now. What these songs mean today hinges just as much on what these performers do as it does on the scores that posterity has handed down to them. It is Sylvia Schwartz whose layered interpretation of Sor's 'Mis descuidados ojos', by turns anxious, reflective and meltingly sweet, converts a simple folk-like form into the self-expression of a complex persona. It is Michael Schade whose rendering of Schubert's strophic, anthem-like 'Täglich zu singen' creates a thoughtful journey of self-discovery out of what might otherwise have been the mere recitation of a utilitarian bourgeois motto ('to be sung daily'). It is the simmering, barely contained intensity of Angelika Kirchschrager's performance of Mendelssohn's 'Der Waldschloss', accompanied by Martineau's pregnant articulation, that leads me to hear the tragic conclusion of that song as foreordained from the beginning. The *Decades* series may purport to give us a snapshot of the 1810s, 20s, or 30s, but in equal measure, it also gives us a summary of the art of recording classic song in the 2010s. Let us hope that we will hear this art applied to even more underserved corners of the repertoire in the *Decades* to come.

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doi: 10.1017/S147940981900051X

First published online 8 January 2020

⁸ On Vogl's performance style, see Eric van Tassel, "'Something Utterly New': Listening to Schubert Lieder. 1: Vogl and the Declamatory Style', *Early Music* 25 (1997): 702–14, and Walther Dürr, 'Schubert and Johann Michael Vogl: A Reappraisal', *19th-Century Music* 3/2 (1979): 126–40.

⁹ Brigitte Fassbaender and Cord Garben, *Carl Loewe: Lieder; Frauenliebe op. 60*, Deutsche Grammophon 445575-2, 1988. For a recent account of Loewe's performance practices as a singer, see Chapter 3 ('Carl Loewe's Performative Romanticism') of Dana Gooley's *Fantasies of Improvisation: Free Playing in Nineteenth-Century Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 116–53.