

PROGRAM NOTES

The collective perception of a great work like Franz Schubert's *Die schöne Müllerin* often makes one pause before deciding to embark on a performance of it. Even more so if one is intending to alter a centerpiece of its construction, namely utilizing a guitar rather than a piano.

The history of the cycle is fascinating in itself. Schubert took the text from a publication of poems by Wilhelm Müller published in 1820, wherein twenty-five poems were dedicated to a story titled *Die schöne Müllerin*. The poem cycle grew out of a game to which Müller had contributed select verses in the salon of Friedrich August von Stägemann, the privy councilor to King Friedrich Wilhelm III. Eventually, Müller expanded his verses to the entire set that appeared in his 1820 book. The book apparently sold well enough that a second edition appeared in 1826, suggesting that many would have been familiar with the poem cycle that Schubert eventually set. The first printing of the songs came in five installments, and only four years before Schubert's death. Indeed, it wasn't performed publicly in its entirety until 1856. That the cycle was conceived as a whole, but not presented immediately as such, either in print or performance, speaks to me about Schubert's foresight that the collection could effectively carry a continuous reading. It also suggests that Schubert may have approached the cycle in terms of scenes, where several songs speak to a particular scene, or an aspect of the protagonist's emotional state. In the end, while each song in the cycle stands alone easily, as a collection they tell a powerful story of a man beset by an equal amount of ardor and apprehension, whose inability to overcome his own impediments leads him to the ultimate surrender.

The translation—a better word, I find, than transcription—for guitar has been a particularly fascinating journey. I've attempted to approach it much as a period professional guitarist would have, rather than using the commercially available versions for guitar that seem to attempt to include as much of the original pianistic material as possible. There are period transcriptions for guitar of Schubert's Lieder, but they are clearly intended for the easier amateur market. So the results you will hear today are a combination of period considerations, distillations of the piano part to its essentials, and my own personal playing style and experience. The guitar you are hearing tonight is a copy of an instrument patented by Johann Georg Stauffer in 1831 in Vienna, made by Bernhardt Kresse in Köln, Germany. The connection between Schubert and Stauffer is particularly tangible; not only did Schubert own a Stauffer guitar, it was the latter who invented the instrument for which Schubert wrote his *Arpeggione Sonata*.

—Simon Martyn-Ellis

This is a piece I've lived with since I was probably very close in age to the protagonist, the Miller Boy. Many young Lieder singers will discover Schubert for the first time through these songs, and embark on the Miller's journey as their first major song cycle, saving the darker, longer *Winterreise* for later in their careers. And while I've kept both pieces close over the years, it is true that *Die schöne Müllerin* takes on additional challenges the farther one travels from adolescence, in terms of both vocal timbre and, dare I say, text memorization!

Having performed other Lieder with period guitar, I have discovered, happily, how the instrument provides a window back into the youthful aspects of Schubert's storytelling in this piece. The intimacy of the romantic guitar, not unlike that of a fortepiano of Schubert's time, invites an especially clear and light vocal delivery. And perhaps more than in other Schubert songs, it's easier to imagine the poet here accompanying himself by the side of the brook, perhaps with an instrument he's carried there on his back. Indeed, toward the middle of the cycle, the Miller Boy wistfully states, "*Meine Laute hab' ich gehängt an die Wand ... ich kann nicht mehr singen, mein Herz ist zu voll.* (I have hung my lute on the wall ... I can't sing anymore, my heart is too full.) It would seem that Schubert would like us to imagine that the Boy has been musically composing his story since the beginning of his journey.

This is not to say that the piano accompaniment as Schubert originally intended is at all inappropriate, rather only to suggest that a performance with guitar presents an opportunity to illuminate different aspects of the scene-painting in Schubert's setting. There is also the sense that the already intimate nature

of the music (the original piano part generally employs a much narrower range of the keyboard than in other Schubert Lieder, for example) is further enhanced by an instrument with fewer strings. It then becomes the guitarist's challenge to draw all of Schubert's colors and images out of six strings, and that of the singer to contribute a more plain-spoken and subtle expression of the poetry. With any luck, this approach accentuates the intimacy of the storytelling in *Die schöne Müllerin*. After all, it's not entirely clear that the aforementioned lute stays on the wall for the remainder of the tale, as the Miller Boy soon after asks, "*Ist es der Nachklang meiner Liebespein? Soll es das Vorspiel neuer Lieder sein?*" (Is that the echo of my love's pain? Or is it the prelude to new songs?)

—Jesse Blumberg