

PROGRAM I

BY THE BROOK

Works of Schubert, Bach and Harbison

SATURDAY AUGUST 27 AT 8:00PM

SUNDAY AUGUST 28 AT 4:00PM

PRE-CONCERT ECOLOGY EVENT

Optional pre-concert ecological restoration conversation and guided stroll departs from the barn at 6:45pm on Saturday, and at 2:45pm on Sunday.

Participants will view and discuss the long-anticipated stream relocation and restoration completed earlier in the summer through Festival woodlands & fields. This event is free to concert ticket holders, but reservations are strongly recommended for this small group excursion.

Please dress for comfort.

PROGRAM NOTES

SCHUBERT – Auf dem Strom

The concert begins with one of Schubert's last pieces, *Auf Dem Strom (By the River)*, for singer (preferably tenor, but sometimes soprano), piano, and obligato horn. This piece is often associated with another very late piece, *Der Hirt auf den Felsen*, for soprano, piano and obligato clarinet, because of their rare use of an instrumental companion for the singer. Both pieces require exceptional vocalists and instrumentalists, and perhaps for that reason require strikingly little of the pianist. But there the similarities end. *Auf dem Strom* is an elegiac, lofty masterpiece, *Der Hirt* is an embarrassingly conventional setting of a lame poem by the poet of *Winterreise*, Wilhelm Mueller, which concludes with a virtuoso ending that seldom escapes sounding contrived.

Auf dem Strom has often been heard as Schubert's last farewell, a call across the waters in what sometimes sounds like Beethoven's horn voice, to the composer he most admired (and for whom he shortly before had served as pallbearer). But the emotion of the piece is more vulnerable and raw than we would hear in a vocal setting by Beethoven (who was said to have been considering the composition of a piece based on this Rellstab poem).

The world of this piece is closest to the many Rellstab songs in Schubert's last cluster of songs, later described as his swan songs (*Schwanengesänge*). E major is the chosen key, the key of the great horn music in Beethoven's *Fidelio*, but most of the music is pulled toward C-sharp minor, and it is hard to hear the restraint and formality so many listeners have found in these passionate evocations of loss, distance,

and loneliness.

SCHUBERT - Goethe Songs

We continue with a selection from Schubert songs to texts by Goethe. We need not retell the story of repeated attempts by Mendelssohn and by Schubert himself to interest the poet in Schubert's work. His antipathy to it is sometimes explained by complaining he was fundamentally unmusical, which is obviously untrue: Goethe had musical training and liked the work of other composers, but ones less adventurous and risky than Schubert. His distaste resembles his feelings about the work of Kleist—he sensed something unbalanced, wild, very threatening to his aesthetic principles. Even the time when very late in life he was stirred by a performance of Schubert's "Erkönig," he found the emotion it engendered both exciting and repellent.

Schubert had two periods of great engagement with Goethe texts, the first in his late teens, the last in his late twenties, in what turned out to be his last years. Our selection centers on texts bearing on the influence of nature on our psychic states, beginning with songs of striking artistic maturity (if we did not know "An Den Mond" was from 1815, we would never dream that a youth could write such a perfectly shaped, eloquently modulated large scale song, but he had already done so—repeatedly).

We know that Schubert's choice of texts mirrored his experience, emotions influenced by the natural world. Even in his last illness he would not forego his vigorous walks in the country.

It is important to notice the exactness of tone with which Schubert observes that the being extolled so grandly in "Ganymed" (1822) is not an earthly Lover, but the Godhead, God in Nature.

A true meeting at the summit of art is to be marked in "Wanderer's Nachtlied," a summary off the allusive art of both collaborators, Schubert's setting, from his next to last year, being perhaps the greatest encounter with a poem no major 19th century songwriter could omit.

BACH - Cantata 165: O heilges Geist- und Wasserbad

About the only way to continue on anything like this plain would be to enter the world of the Bach cantata, music made not for applause but for contemplation, elevation, aesthetic challenge, repair, and revelation. Bach cantatas most often conclude with a very brief "congregational" hymn, a piece meant to bring the community together (so intricately composed however that it is unlikely the congregation joined, though surely some people hummed along with the hymns they knew so well). These concluding movements are so un-showy, so conversational with their public, that they work against the effectiveness of Bach cantatas in concert performance. This is one of the many reasons we have been anxious to present them in our festival.

Cantata 165—*Oh holy ghost, and bath of water*—is obviously about baptism, a sacrament elevated to a place of great liturgical centrality by Martin Luther, an interest often reflected by Bach as well. The piece comes from Weimar, Bach in his mid twenties, writing few but very choice cantatas of a mystical visionary kind that he never really revisits (he acquires many other equally gripping resources). The poet is the keeper of the mint and city councilor in Weimar, Salomo Franck, the best poet Bach will find. We urge the listener to listen to the sound and the sense of the words which give rise the soprano's sublime first phrase, "holy ghost and water immersion, which enfolds us in God's kingdom and inscribes us in the Book of Life," sonorous compound words that are the glory of German poetry all the way through to Trakl and Celan.

The water of baptism flows in varied rivers through every movement of this short cantata. The most detailed and colorful movement is the shortest, the recitative for bass, where every important word has its accurate harmony, making it possible even for those of us unfamiliar with Pietistic 18th century religious imagery to know that here the “blood-red vision of the serpent” is not sinister, but represents salvation.

BACH – The Art of Fugue (selections)

Of the three kinds of Bach music represented on our program, the fugues from *The Art of Fugue* are both the most abstract, stemming as they do from a work consisting of two hours of fugal variation on a single (itself very abstractly varied) theme. But after close habitation, these pieces turn out to be Bach's most intimate, personal, revealing and colorful pieces, the reward for the player spending the long hours needed to play these keyboard pieces least fitted to the hand. Then the performer's job is to somewhat, incrementally, close the gap between acolyte of the pieces and their often first-hearers. They are like letters from a very wise grandfather whose wisdom we haven't enough years to decipher.

Nature figures in the Bach fugues mainly through that composer's concept that musical systems correspond to the physics of the universe, a Newtonian concept, and one that offered the composer a sense of justness and coherence which, in spite of great creative peaks of achievement, has seemed to erode since. Just as some philosophic thinkers in Bach's time seemed to find theological and physical proofs in whatever they understood about the cosmos, it is clear that for Bach Music Theory was also provable. No such luck in recent times, where we recognize in Nature, as it recedes from daily experience, only fleeting evidence of order, little reassurance of a logical design.

HARBISON - Mottetti di Montale, Libro 4

At least that is how Montale's nature images are heard in the fragment of a long song cycle heard on this program. The frogs, bees, and dragonflies are evanescent, reminders of fleeting experience, not crowning lofty mountain tops as in Schubert, but found on a path, in the ditch. But we still need what we can find of nature to remind us what has happened, what IS happening.

BACH – Violin Concerto in E major, BWV 1042

A third Bach manner is available to close this program, so assured, so Musical, so comradely in its address that it seems amazing that it is made by the composer of the fugues. But Bach was a musician among musicians, from a family of composers, and writing directly for each other, as in a wonderful concerto like this one for violin, gives us a glimpse of how this schnapp-drinking, cigar-smoking, hard-working crowd celebrated their communal art. It is a bit unclear when Bach composed this hearty and elegant concerto for violin and strings, but its first performances would likely be in coffeehouses, university halls, or in a patron's house. Like all of Bach's music—for he had no second gear—this is music of quality and variety, deep, and generous.

Notes by John Harbison, Artistic Co-Director, Token Creek Chamber Music Festival