

PROGRAM III

WATER COLORS

Two Schubert masterworks: Die Schöne Müllerin & the Trout Quintet

FRIDAY SEPTEMBER 2 AT 7:30PM

SUNDAY SEPTEMBER 4 AT 4:00PM

PROGRAM NOTES

SCHUBERT – *Die Schöne Müllerin*

For many years commentators seemed to regard *Die Schöne Müllerin* as the lighter, more inviting of Schubert's two big song cycles. It was not difficult to perceive the gravity of the Winter's Journey (*Winterreise*) which begins with the hero battling the elements, his disappointments already revealed, the destination already in view. For some reason the final arrival in total madness and despair seemed a more grievous outcome to some listeners than the much more starkly etched suicide which concludes *Die Schöne Müllerin*.

While marking the significance of its date of composition, 1828, Schubert's turning point, the writer of the Schubert entry in *Groves' Dictionary of Music* blithely states "Yet during this depressing period the first songs of the *Schöne Müllerin* cycle were composed: they grace this unhappy year, in truth, like a sunny archipelago of songs. The author is Wilhelm Mueller, and the story told in the sequence of poems originated in a family charade."

Well, some sort of charade is involved here, but it is the very serious one of self delusion, a dangerous state of fantasy which costs the insecure and socially inept protagonist his life. Certainly a turning point in the consideration of these songs was the first recording by the great Schubertian Graham Johnson three decades ago, accompanied by the first of his essays on the piece. Throughout his many encounters with the cycle he stresses the following points: The young man in the story has really only one confidante, the brook, to which he confides his deepest hopes and feelings, and from whom he imagines answers both stern and compassionate. He very likely also imagines as well his address to and the reactions of the young woman, who speaks authentically only once in the piece, wishing to go inside from the rain after the young man manages only to sit with her speechless and in tears.

The very Schubertian subtlety which Johnson recognizes in the cycle is that the primary character is manic and delusional, alternately believing, on no evidence, "she is mine," and then facing the truth that she has fallen in love with the hunter. The latter part of the cycle—when the color green comes to represent not so much betrayal as defeat, failure of nerve—dives to a depth of painful acceptance—denial extreme even for Schubert.

It is hard to resist feeling almost too close to the composer in the song “Trockne Blumen,” when the dry flowers of his defeat are reborn at his funeral, bursting into bloom as she walks by. Schubert: the shy still-young artist, writing some of these pieces in his only hospital stay, under a new verdict of syphilis, riddled by mercury treatment, finding just the way to (shyly) predict his own eventual triumph.

SCHUBERT – Quintet for Piano and Strings in A major, “The Trout”

If the listener has attended closely to *Die Schöne Müllerin*, some radical therapy is really necessary. It can take the witness to very difficult places, and short of very expensive counseling, the best remedy may be found in the Schubert of 1819, his self proclaimed best year, fresh from a tramp with his musician friend Vogel through the beautiful Steyr region of Austria.

The quintet for piano and strings is one of the world’s best loved pieces—long, leisurely, abundant, and ever fresh in sonority. (It is easy to forget what an effective and novel idea the presence of the bass viol was, here and in his Octet.) The piece abounds in a type of music typical of Schubert, highly exceptional in other composers, music of trance, the pleasure of merely circulating, not really stasis—much too pleasurable, even indulgent to be described as stasis.

Another key to its charm and geniality is a quality for which the piece is often criticized, but which was clearly a choice, in the service of the unbuttoned, un-scholastic mood. There are three movements in the work that are in what is often described as classical sonata form, with two principal thematic swatches of music, stated in two different harmonic centers, which will come back at the end in the same harmonic center, requiring the composer to do some fancy structural tailoring to bring off, often occasioning some admirable things we did not hear at the beginning. Schubert in this piece eschews the tailoring, brings everything back in the original sequence, which suggests that “a copyist could do it.” However, this method causes what should be in the home key as the return to instead be in the Reposeful subdominant, giving to every movement—deliberately?—a mood of genial lassitude, contentment, and relaxation.

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