
Concerts

Schreier brings lieder literacy to Americans

by Jeanne P. Bell

It was to a standing-room-only audience at the Grace Rainey Rogers auditorium in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art that East German tenor Peter Schreier and pianist Norman Shetler performed a poetic interpretation of Franz Schubert's classic song cycle, *Die Schöne Müllerin* (The Fair Miller-Maid) on April 23. Hearing a live performance of Schreier's artistry for the first time (having listened to his recordings of this and other staples of the German lied repertoire over the years) convinced this reviewer, once again, of the absolute necessity for bringing live performances of the classical song literature to American audiences.

Indeed, in discussions with Schreier before and after his New York recital, he told representatives of the international Schiller Institutes that this is a special concern of his. Speaking to Schiller Institute member Gabriele Carls by telephone, he reported that he and his wife were in New York completing a lieder tour of the U.S. because, "We're living in a loud and noisy world." Mrs. Schreier had told Ms. Carls, "We spend more money than we make every time we come here, but we come anyway, because we really feel that America needs the beauty of the lied." Mr. Schreier elaborated: "The quiet beauty of the lied can reach the hearts and souls of Americans."

Schreier demonstrated this principle throughout his concert, using subtleties of voicing and coloration which are difficult to replicate on recordings, which are "dead" instruments. Even despite the fact that Schreier, like virtually all singers today, "tuned his voice" to a too-high-pitch of A 440 (which is harmful to the voice and to the composer's willful intent to distinguish registral shifts within the singer's voice), the tenor aided by Norman Shetler's artistry, was able to bring out changes in the mood of each song.

Throughout the concert, both performers exhibited tremendous powers of concentration, even though the audience turned pages after each of the songs. Despite this distraction, it was interesting to note that the listeners were intent on following the nuance of each word of the text, as Schreier and Shetler told in music the narrative of the young miller, his travels, and infatuation with a girl he'd never really met.

Mr. Schreier is best known for his recordings and recitals

of Beethoven and Mozart lieder, which are only infrequently performed. Like many artists (they are all too few) who have built their singing careers almost entirely on the concert stage rather than through the medium of opera, Schreier does not have a "huge" voice. Many tenor voices come to mind which are more beautiful in a "natural" state. Yet, Peter Schreier's voice is perfectly suited to perform the lieder repertoire, and his affinity to the poetry can hardly be missed.

This was best demonstrated in the series of songs in which the miller-boy addresses his adolescent concerns to the babbling brook. In varying degrees as the cycle progressed, Schreier colored the voicing of each first-person divergence from the narrative, in such a way that the audience, without knowing German, could clearly understand the boy's infatuated state of mind, demonstrated in the brief spurts of laughter which punctuated the performance.

One brief passage in particular stuck in my mind, in which Schreier fairly spoke the words, said by "the Master," "Euer Werk hat mir gefallen" ("I am pleased with your work"), in the fifth song. Few singers today are able to successfully achieve such an effect, partially because of the influence of "verismo," soap-opera-style methods employed in some operatic circles since the time of Puccini. When such an attempt is made by such singers, what comes across is something akin to a mafia godfather, with a gravelly voice.

While Schreier conveyed poetic ideas in a way that most singers today cannot, I could not help but wonder how much more beautiful, and accurate, a performance could be given if he and Shetler would perform the Schubert cycle at the lower tuning of C 256. For instance, in the fifth song cited above (*Am Feierabend*, "The Hour of Rest"), in the higher tuning used at Rogers auditorium, the singer was forced to shift into the third register too early, thus emphasizing the wrong note in the composition, and the wrong word. The words here read, "thus the lovely maid of the mill might see how faithfully I seek to serve her." Instead of moving into the third register on the words "might see," in the higher tuning the singer shifts into the higher register on the word "maid of the mill."

Happily, audiences the world over may soon have a chance to hear the duo perform the cycle at C 256 tuning. Following their New York recital, this reviewer had the joy to speak to the two performers, who both signed the Schiller Institute's petition to the Italian government to return to the scientific tuning pitch of C 256 cycles. In the earlier conversation with Ms. Carls, Schreier said that he would like to make a U.S. lieder tour dedicated to performances using a Mozart-Beethoven period fortepiano, tuned at C 256. Peter Schreier also offered to be on the international advisory board of the new lieder society now being created by the Schiller Institute as a vehicle to bring beauty, joy, and great art to a dying civilization. Hence, there is hope that Americans will come to know Germany's greatest poets—Schiller, Heine, Goethe—through the songs of her greatest composers.