A Stranger I Arrive,  
A Stranger I Depart

Tyler Duncan, baritone; Sarah Rothenberg, piano

Franz Schubert  
(1797-1828)

Winterreise, D. 911 (1827)
Gute Nacht Good Night
Die Wetterfahne The Weathervane
Gefrorne Tränen Frozen Tears
Erstarrung Numbness
Der Lindenbaum The Linden Tree
Wasserflut Flood Water
Auf dem Flusse On the River
Rückblick A Look Backward
Irrlicht Will o’ the Wisp
Rast Rest
Frühlingstraum Dream of Spring
Einsamkeit Solitude
Die Post The Post
Der greise Kopf The Old Man’s Head
Die Krähe The Crow
Letzte Hoffnung Last Hope
Im Dorfe In the Village
Der stürmische Morgen The Stormy Morning
Täuschung Illusion
Der Wegweiser The Sign Post
Das Wirtshaus The Inn
Mut! Courage!
Die Nebensonnen The False Suns
Der Leiermann The Hurdy-Gurdy Man

These performances are dedicated to the memory of Bertrand Davezac (April 27, 1930 - August 26, 2017), Da Camera founding board member, former chief curator of the Menil Collection, and cherished friend.

Presented in conjunction with the Menil Collection’s exhibition Mona Hatoum: Terra Infirma, on view October 13, 2017 to February 25, 2018. The audience is invited to visit the exhibition during the hour before the concert.

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“You own a house or rent an apartment... You wake in the morning and drink your coffee or tea. You drive a car or a motorbike, or perhaps you take the bus. You go to work and turn on your computer. You go out at night and flirt and date. You have hopes, dreams and expectations. You take your humanity for granted. You keep believing you are human even when the catastrophe arrives and renders you homeless. Your town or city or countryside is in ruins. You try to make it to the border. Only then, hoping to leave, or making it across the border, do you understand that those who live on the other side do not see you as human at all.

That is the dread experience of becoming a refugee, of joining the 65 million unwanted and stateless people in the world today…”

Viet Thanh Nguyen  

The image of the refugee appears to me today in Franz Schubert’s haunting song cycle, Winterreise. Composed nearly 200 years ago in 1827, to texts by the poet Müller, Winterreise tells the story of a “winter’s journey” made by a rejected lover expelled from a town, wandering alone through a frigid landscape. It is a journey without shelter, without friend, and with no arrival.

We are given few details of our wanderer’s past. His “liebschen” or “sweetheart” has no name. And, from the opening lines, he, himself, is described only as “a stranger.” Schubert depicts a stark cold present, colored by the emotional warmth of memories, heartbreaking pain of exile, and, above all, a relentless, colored by the emotional warmth of memories, a sense of the poet and the underlying emotion of the texts with musical genius: frozen tear drops fall as halting staccato chords in the piano, the river which no longer flows grows in menacing power from a whisper to a powerful outcry, the illusionary dream of spring appears in a major tonality too sweet to believe. Each poem receives a musical setting that brilliantly merges the physical with the psychological, so that at once we receive a visual sense of the poetry and an underscoring of the drama within. The work is monumental in scale, as its length exceeds an hour; and yet, at the same time, Winterreise is fragmentary, terse, and economical in its aesthetic. It is, above all, intimate, and there is a sense throughout that we are overhearing a monologue in which the speaker is addressing no one but himself – no one is listening; perhaps it is here that we find a kinship to Beckett’s theater.

The opening song, Good Night, sets the strange mood, as the piano’s walking pace trudges relentlessly forward. Night. “I cannot choose the time of my journey, I must find my own way in this darkness…” There is mystery surrounding our wanderer’s hasty departure. Why is he in a hurry? Why does he leave on a long journey in the dark of night? The cycle draws additional power from what is left unsaid, from what we do not know. How much of this romance was real, how much imagined? The beckon-
ing trees, speaking winds, singing birds all seem to address the protagonist; he, in turn, talks to the snow, the barking dogs, the river...but absent from his landscape is another human being, until, in the 24th and final song, he sees, only from a distance, the barefoot, aged organ grinder.

The background to the story is romantic, the setting is rural; but the picture of alienation — the absence of community, an individual who speaks only to himself, whose emotional swings confuse dream and reality, whose desperation borders on madness, and whose suffering falls on the indifferent world around him — describes modern existence. The backstory of a love affair gone wrong — and we never find out how or why — could just as easily be replaced by Viet Thanh Nguyen’s quiet description, which I quote above, of the “before” and “after” of becoming a refugee. Our visual images of refugees are of groups, we think of refugees in the plural, but for each individual who experiences this lack of home and loss of legitimacy, the drama is singular.

*Winterreise* was composed in 1827, at a time when Schubert was coming to terms with the gravity of his declining health. His friend, the poet Mayrhofer, when hearing the song cycle for the first time, noted that Schubert “had been long and seriously ill, had gone through shattering experiences, and life for him had shed its rosy color; winter had come for him. The poet’s irony, rooted in despair, appealed to him; he expressed it in cutting tones. I was painfully moved.”

The bleak and contemporary open-endedness to this cycle of 24 songs is exemplified by its concluding not with an answer, but with two questions: “Shall I go with you, strange old man? Will you play the hurdy-gurdy to my songs?” The solitary organ-grinder, outcast, poor, barefoot, appears in the distance to our traveler. The hollow repeated drone of open fifths in the piano, the winding melodic fragment, the weary vocal line which leaves the final question shockingly unresolved musically, hanging in the air — create a haunting sense of time stopped; there is no moving forward, no moving back...

What is real, if not the details of his past or the character of his moral behavior, is what the individual feels. And here Schubert uncannily mines the essential existential questions of life by depicting with such emotional honesty, simplicity and painful beauty the state of aloneness. It is a state that each of us knows to varying degrees; in a sense, it is our unifying experience. Our separateness, at times frightening, is what we share.

In this remarkable musical work, Schubert reaches across that divide of aloneness to make a human connection, one that can still reach us two centuries later. *Winterreise* tells us, today, something about the fragility of our own world and what it may feel like to make that fearful journey from being on the inside — of a home, a village, a community — to that unknown other side.

*Sarah Rothenberg*