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Schubert's Songs in Other Hands

By DAVID MERMELSTEIN

Even jaded lieder fans will welcome a new album featuring several of Schubert's best-known songs performed by the mezzo-soprano Anne Sofie von Otter and the bass-baritone Thomas Quasthoff, two of the most esteemed singers around. But what really sets their new CD apart is that the well-trod songs are performed in orchestral versions arranged by six of Schubert's most gifted successors.

The record, from Deutsche Grammophon, was the conductor Claudio Abbado's idea, and it was made from concert performances taped in Paris last year. Ms. von Otter and Mr. Quasthoff appeared in separate programs, and a similar division prevails here: except for two encores, Ms. von Otter sings the first half, Mr. Quasthoff the rest. That's too bad, for although the singing is beyond reproach, mixing things up would have afforded greater contrast. Still, the sheer variety of these arrangements precludes any hint of monochromaticism.

Perhaps to allay purists' concerns, the disc opens with "Romanze," a song originally set for orchestra, from the incidental music to Helmina von Chezy's play "Rosamunde." It makes a perfect lead-in to Benjamin Britten's orchestration of "Die Forelle" ("The Trout"), for both use woodwind solos to complement the vocal line. Songs transcribed by Brahms, Berlioz, Liszt and Webern follow, but only Max Reger's settings fully transform Schubert's originals.

The combination of Schubert's melodic gifts, the power of the poetry he set and Reger's knack for atmospheric orchestration turns the songs into full-blown scenes. So here are "Gretchen am Spinnrade" ("Gretchen at the Spinning Wheel"), Schubert's breakthrough lied, sounding, aptly enough, like something out of an operatic treatment of the Faust legend; "Nacht und Träume" ("Night and Dreams") in a fashion that Massenet or Puccini could embrace; and "Prometheus" as though lifted from "Tannhäuser."

But as Philip Larkin wrote, adding doesn't always mean increase. Reger's orchestration only detracts from the delicacy of "An die Musik," a hymn to music's redemptive powers. And much the same can be said of Webern's plodding rejiggering of the yearning "Du Bist die Ruh" ("You Are Tranquillity").

The inherently orchestral "Erlkönig" ("Elf King") receives two resettings. Reger's is predictably and effectively grand, Mr. Quasthoff giving voice to the song's three characters with rare and welcome differentiation. Berlioz's version, despite the brasses and drums, is less thickly textured, allowing Ms. von Otter to dominate the musical action more easily.

Despite Ms. von Otter's and Mr. Quasthoff's excellent work, the Chamber Orchestra of Europe may be the CD's real star. Under the baton of Mr. Abbado, who has been a longstanding patron of the orchestra, the musicians play a host of oddities with the same conviction and tonal allure they have so often brought to great music, turning doctored Schubert into something beyond a curiosity.