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Expressive Inner and Outer Worlds: Adams, Schubert, Strauss, and Shostakovich in Dallas

<div>Thursday 15-Mar-12 08:00pm</div>	<div>Map Meyerson Symphony Center, Dallas, TX van Zweden and Shostakovich</div> <div>More info...</div> <div>Reviews...</div>	<div>Adams, Dark Waves</div> <div>Schubert, Songs - various</div> <div>Strauss R., Songs - various</div> <div>Shostakovich, Symphony no. 9 in E flat major, Op.70</div> <div>Dallas Symphony Orchestra Jaap van Zweden, Conductor Matthias Goerne, Baritone</div> <div>Listen now by Naxos</div>
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The Dallas Symphony Orchestra opened their latest series on Thursday with works by John Luther Adams, Schubert, Richard Strauss, and Shostakovich. The German baritone Matthias Goerne joined the DSO and Artistic Director Jaap van Zweden for a performance that was moving and powerful enough to far outshine a couple of puzzling managerial decisions.

The works on this program offered a survey of the various ways in which human beings grapple, through the medium of art, with the outside world and our own emotional worlds within. John Luther Adams, an American composer born in 1953 (not to be confused with the also-prominent John Adams), has lived for nearly 40 years in Alaska and has made the environment a focal point in his music. He has described *Dark Waves* as a meditation on the calamities facing humanity today, namely global climate change. After this work came a selection of eleven *Lieder* by Schubert and Strauss, songs which range from homely and charming to intimately profound. They explore love, death, and several other themes, only using the outside world as an allegorical reflection of inner emotional states. The second half comprised Shostakovich's *Ninth Symphony*. Written right at the end of World War II, it was expected by audiences to be a politically-charged celebration of Soviet victory, but Shostakovich opted instead for irreverence. The gaiety and silliness which pervade the work reflect Shostakovich's refusal to be downtrodden despite the horrors the world had just experienced, as well as his personal and professional hardships under Soviet Rule.



I had two minor complaints this evening: the efficacy of the Adams was potentially compromised due to a neglected direction in the score; and the choice of programming the songs before the Shostakovich later risked ruining the impact of the former with the brash nature of the latter. Mr. Adams was very specific in his instructions for a performance of *Dark Waves*, even prescribing a certain arrangement of the instruments on stage. (I do not purport to be an expert, but this disregarded request by the composer was, strangely, mentioned in the program notes.) I believe Mr. Adams had a clear idea of what he wanted by ordering the piano and percussion instruments to be placed in the middle of the orchestra; the low notes in the piano which begin the piece would then spread throughout the strings and then the rest of the orchestra (and electronics) in a concentric, water-like manner. Surely there was a good reason to organize the ensemble the way it was at the Meyerson, but it left one curious as to how the work would sound had that detail been altered.

Regarding the order of the program, the Shostakovich symphony was an unsettling postlude to the deeply touching set of *Lieder*. It is certainly a fine piece, and challenges the assumptions of the listener in ways at once brazen, cheeky, and amiable. However, hearing it after Schubert and Strauss made these strengths seem invalid and almost annoying. Additionally, the theme of music as reaction to external forces may have been enhanced if the Adams and Shostakovich had been heard consecutively.

But the performance itself was extraordinary. The way Mr. Adams evokes the sea in *Dark Waves* transcends mere text-painting to evoke something meaningful. Like storm-strewn detritus bobbing in the water, the acoustic instruments imperceptibly fade in and out of the synthesized base layer of sound. His harmonies and textures seem at first glance to be too similar throughout, but just like an actual expanse of open ocean, each moment in the course of this piece has been carefully composed to give precision to every shaft of light penetrating his murky mass of sound. Maestro van Zweden and the DSO gave a brilliant reading that brought out the inventiveness of this work while still making it accessible.

The *Lieder* of Schubert and Strauss can sound deceptively simple, and Mr. Goerne made big musical statements while also achieving this simplicity. His is a robust voice, which he tends to inflect with dark, rich colors, immeasurably beyond the brassy sound of many of today's eminent vocal stars. His subtle shadings and communicative powers mesmerized the audience for nearly an hour. Mr. van Zweden, conducting orchestral accompaniments by composers ranging from Carl Maria von Weber to Brahms to Strauss himself, painted musical backgrounds remarkable in their coloristic detail and economy of expressive means. A stunning, ethereal "Morgen" and an encore of Schubert's "An die Musik" capped a truly breathtaking musical experience.

Mr. van Zweden does the twentieth-century Russians like very few others, and he led the DSO in a high-energy Shostakovich Ninth. The writing is virtuosic throughout, and the woodwinds were especially impressive, handling wickedly difficult passages with grace and impeccable coordination. For sheer thrills, it made for quite an end to the evening.

Submitted by Evan Mitchell on 17th March 2012



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