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## Reviews

OUR TAKES ON THEATER, DANCE, MUSIC AND OPERA



Review: van Zweden & Shostakovich | Dallas Symphony Orchestra | Morton H. Meyerson Symphony Center

### The Three S's

Baritone Matthias Goerne and the Dallas Symphony takes on Strauss and Schubert songs, followed by the Shostakovich Ninth.

by John Norine Jr.  
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**Dallas** — Before his death at age 31, Franz Schubert wrote almost 600 songs for solo voice. Several were combined into three song cycles, though the vast majority were either stand alone works or grouped into two-, three- or four-song opuses. Of these songs, less than 30 were written for anything other than solo voice and piano.

While not as prolific as Schubert, Richard Strauss was responsible for almost 200 *Lieder* in his own right, although he set more of his songs to orchestral accompaniment, including the famous *Four Last Songs* (*Vier letzte Lieder*). While the song tradition of the classical and romantic eras were strong in their own right, the genre was generally limited to the chamber and salon concerts. As a result, seeing solo *Lieder* in the concert hall is unusual.

In their most recent concert cycle, the **Dallas Symphony** under the baton of Jaap van Zweden broke from the traditional programming of a concerto to feature several songs by both **Schubert and Strauss** as sung by baritone **Matthias Goerne**, as well as **Shostakovich's Ninth Symphony** and a work composed by John Luther Adams entitled **Dark Waves**.

The concert opened with the Adams piece, which is scored for the full orchestral complement as well as pre-recorded sounds (described in the program notes as an "aura" of sounds). The work is textural in nature, having no concise melodic content per se; the music is made up of waves of sound rising and falling in their own time before coming together at the high point of the work where all twelve tones sound simultaneously. The wave from the ebb after reaching this pinnacle and the work ends with the same tone as heard in the opening.

The texture of the work stays constant and is, at times, reminiscent of the Brucknerian concept of sound clouds (or sheets, depending on the musicologist one asks). The placement of the pre-recorded music precluded a clear delineation between the tape and the orchestra; it lessened the "gimmick" of using an extra-musical device and incorporated the sound into the texture of the orchestra as a whole.

After a brief resetting of the stage, Goerne took the stage with Maestro van Zweden for the Strauss and Schubert songs, set in alternation beginning with Schubert's "An Silvia" and ending with Strauss's "Morgen."

Goerne was exquisite with his vocal prowess, navigating through the song list with a cool ease. His tone is very warm and rich with a strong sense of musicality and good control over his support and diction. It was entertaining to see him interact with van Zweden on the podium during each of the songs, and the visual added to the overall presentation. The only drawback to the performance was that Goerne made use of a music stand that either held the music or at least the texts; he referred to it often and it took away from the interaction between himself and Zweden at times. The song selection was mixed, but many of the songs chosen shared a similar texture and as a result, some blended together. This should not take away from Goerne's (or even the orchestra's) performance. But if the idea is repeated, more contrast could be selected to show a greater range of composer's output.

After the intermission, the orchestra returned to the stage for Shostakovich's Ninth Symphony. The work was completed in 1945 in celebration of the Soviet victory over the Nazis (and the end of the Second World War). Originally planned to be a large scale work with a large orchestra, vocal soloists, and chorus, Shostakovich changed the structure drastically, choosing rather for a smaller orchestra with no soloists or chorus and composed in a more Neo-classical style that is often compared both to Haydn's symphonic output as well as Prokofiev's First Symphony.

Never truly well-received by the Soviet regime, the work was actually banned for a period of time in the Soviet Union (between 1948 and 1955) for its failure to "reflect the true spirit of the people of the Soviet Union" (as reported by Laurel Fay in her book *Shostakovich: A Life*). The symphony stands in dark contrast to the composer's other two symphonies composed during the war.

Anyone reading into the history of Shostakovich knows that the composer was a silent dissident of the communist regime and was known for hiding his sentiments in his music. However (or perhaps as a result of), the popular practice in performance of his works lends itself to "tongue firmly in cheek" readings, and adds implied emotion where none may be present.

The first movement (which is clearly the most classical in nature) suffered the greatest from this affliction in van Zweden's reading. At times, the music came off as shrill, fighting with the classical nature of the music and loading up on the implied snark. Van Zweden himself fed into the overblown emotions of the movement, over-conducting at times. In fact, there were a few instances where he seemed to channel his predecessor and leap into the air—it came across as disingenuous and distracting.

Then the first movement ended, and the entire tenor of the performance changed; van Zweden immediately took on a more subdued persona and began to feed into the musical feeling instead of detracting from it. This change, combined with some sublime solo work by clarinetist Gregory Raden and bassoonist Wilfred Roberts salvaged the performance of the work. Roberts is to be especially commended, as the recitative sections that link the fourth and fifth movements were beautifully performed with a calm, relaxed tone that filled the entire hall.

Goerne is worth the price of admission to the concert on his own. If the first movement of the Shostakovich can settle a bit, then the concert cycle could be one of the strongest of the season.

TJ

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