

**Schubert's: *Winterreise*: A highly selective survey of the discography**  
by Ralph Moore

"Come to Schuber's today and I will play you a cycle of terrifying songs; they have affected me more than has ever been the case with any other songs."

(Schubert's words in 1827 as recalled by his close friend Joseph von Spaun)

"You have to be haunted by this cycle to be able to sing it."

(Elena Gerhardt, celebrated German mezzo-soprano Lieder specialist)

Strange though it may seem to us now, habituated as we are to the genre, Schubert virtually invented the song-cycle as an art form and indeed his achievement has not been surpassed since. His *Winterreise* is for the Lieder singer the Everest of Romantic song cycles and arguably the greatest of its kind. It is the product of a remarkable combination of the talents of two young German-speaking artists (Schubert being Austrian), both geniuses: one a poet, the other a composer and both doomed to a premature death when barely into their thirties.

Beethoven might have shown Schubert the way with songs such as "Adelaide" and "An die ferne Geliebte", presumably serving as models for *Die schöne Müllerin* and *Winterreise*, but lovely as they are, they have nothing of the breadth and scale of Schubert's grim psychological narrative, a setting of twenty-four poems by Wilhelm Müller charting the mental and physical journey of a young man plunged into despair by unrequited love. Suffused with the same hyper-Romantic sensibility which characterises Goethe's – and, subsequently, Massenet's - *Werther*, *Winterreise* exploits and sustains the literary device of pathetic fallacy by reflecting the desolation of the protagonist's soul in a musical and textual depiction of a bleak winter landscape. The lover does not seem to find the same consolation in his environment as Werther, but nor is his self-absorption as irritating; instead, he sees in its harshness a corollary to his own emptiness and the conclusion to his psychomachia is more ambiguous: like Werther, he descends into hopeless isolation and perhaps even madness, but whereas Werther incontrovertibly takes his own life, it is unclear whether Müller's lover ultimately drowns himself or simply plods on, numbed and suspended in a half-lit world of grief.

*Winterreise* was originally composed for the tenor voice, whose implied youthfulness perhaps sits best with it, but there is no compelling reason why lower male voices or even female singers should not undertake it and it has frequently been variously transposed to accommodate its performance both in recital and on record by the whole gamut of vocal tessituras, from lyric sopranos like Margaret Price, Barbara Hendricks and Christine Schäfer, following the examples of Lotte Lehmann (who could sing virtually anything; you may hear on YouTube her very slow, intense, beautifully vocalised version of "Die Krähe" from 1940) and Elisabeth Schumann (who recorded only individual songs) to deep basses like Martti Talvela and Kurt Moll. Among the women, however, I would suggest that the most successful have been dusky-voiced singers such as mezzo-sopranos Brigitte Fassbaender, Christa Ludwig and contralto Nathalie Stutzmann whose deep, lower extension is consonant with the mood of the songs; sadly, at least two high sopranos here left it too late to set down their versions.

I have chosen the title of this survey carefully, as there are literally over five hundred recordings of this gloomiest of song cycles and I am going to cover no more than a handful of those, making a very personal selection - and I make no apology for doing so, as attempting a comprehensive survey is too ambitious and daunting a project. Looking at the discographies, I was surprised to see just how many singers, many of whom I have never heard, have been by drawn by the fascination of this cycle to entrust their interpretations to posterity. Obviously the bulk of them do not feature here but that proliferation of recordings by lesser artists brings to mind the old adage that the best is the enemy of the good and even though I concede that there might be hidden gems lurking among them, I have restricted my survey to the more famous voices which please me, Furthermore, I must warn the reader that I have excluded recordings by some of the most famous and celebrated Lieder singers in the

catalogue, either on the grounds that I do not like their voices or, as in the case of singers such as Margaret Price or Barbara Hendricks, they recorded it too late in their careers.

My main reason for ignoring some singers' recordings, however, is usually that I believe that their voices are fundamentally poorly produced, evincing improper vocal technique resulting in an essentially unpleasing and possibly pathological sound. If you fear that those criteria amount to invincible ignorance or wilful prejudice, as they say on "Match of the Day", "avert your attention now" - or continue reading knowing that you may expose yourself to the risk of being seized by a fit of manufactured outrage as a response to my opinions.

Let me clarify my no-go areas. My first exclusion category consists of what I hear as those windy, throaty, "Kermit-voiced" Germanic baritones headed by the likes of Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, whose voices lack proper resonance and rounded beauty of tone. All my life, in over fifty years of loving the human voice operating at its optimum beauty and efficiency, I have been told that DFD's artistry represents the pinnacle of Lieder singing. While I can enjoy him in a few, limited recordings made in the earlier part of his long career, I have never recognised in his singing the paragon others claim it to be. His example has given rise to a succession of mainly Germanic baritones whose vocal technique, based either directly via teaching or indirectly via imitation, reproduces the same flaws which characterise his singing. Those successors include baritones such as Wolfgang Holzmair and Matthias Goerne, whose tone is forced and the product of too much tension on the thyro-arytenoid muscles in their vocal apparatus. The result is a sound I cannot abide but which receives widespread acceptance and even adulation, causing some to wax lyrical in a manner which baffles me.

The second group to go is that of the white, mixed-falsetto tenors, who croon and bleat. They are headed by Peter Pears and Peter Schreier, whose voices are to my ears caricatures of the sound made by true lyric tenors such as the heavenly twins Aksel Schiøtz and Fritz Wunderlich. They have been followed by a host of tenors with similarly small, constricted voices like Ian Bostridge, Mark Padmore, Francisco Araiza, Christoph Prégardien, Werner Güra, Hans Peter Blochwitz, Pavel Breslik, and Daniel Behle. I do not believe that this is how the true Lieder tenor should sound.

There is also a handful of singers who have brought Schubert into their repertoire but whose voices are afflicted by the dreaded wobble, such as Theo Adam, Christopher Maltman and Michael Schade. Too broad a vibrato is anathema to achieving the requisite intimate poise of good Lieder singing. Obviously all three categories can overlap or coincide in a voice.

That's already a lot of famous singers to dismiss, and I lay myself open to the accusation that I am a nobody who has no right to criticise singers who have made, or are currently forging, successful careers. Punters who like the sound they make will be equally as uncomprehending of my repugnance for that sound as I am that they like it. I repeat, I can go only with my taste and what my ears tell me. Once beauty of tone as the fundamental principle of Lieder-singing is replaced by over-emphasis of text and an "intellectualisation" process which emphasises cerebral content over emotion, the Lied suffers, especially if that approach runs in tandem with a deterioration of the singer's vocal prowess as was the case with Fischer-Dieskau. For reasons which remain unfathomable to me, he made something like eight studio recordings; towards the end of that series the hubris behind such an obsession, far exceeding Karajan's compulsion to re-record favourite works, blinded him to the fact that his instrument had become a caricature of its pristine glory and his verbal tics of pouncing and barking became egregious. Schubert singers who preceded DFD such as Gerhard Hüsch and Heinrich Schlusnus never evinced those faults, and happily a good few baritones since have avoided that model: I cite as examples Thomas Allen, Jorma Hynninen, Olaf Bär, Gerald Finley and Florian Boesch. Tenors with properly registered, more robust voices who also cut it for me include some "old school" singers like Rudolf Schock, Julius Patzak, Peter Anders, Anton Dermota and Ernst Haefliger, and a few more moderately vocally endowed, relatively modern singers like Ian Partridge – light, but resonant and incisive – and heavier-voiced tenors such as Vickers and, most recently, Jonas Kaufmann. Lyric and

dramatic baritones as per those above commonly sing the cycle; but some bass-baritones such as José van Dam, Thomas Quasthoff and Hans Hotter have also successfully sung it. Basses are rarer but obviously its dark hue suits their tessitura, and prominent among successful bass exponents are Martti Talvela and the aforementioned Kurt Moll.

It is noticeable, too, that many of the Schubert singers whose voices I do not enjoy have eschewed opera, as if tacitly implying that “less” voice is needed for Lieder, whereas the reverse is true of my favoured artists, most of who were or are equally at home singing on a larger scale, on stage, appearing successfully in opera. Very few Italian or Latinate singers include Schubert song cycles in their repertoire – Ferruccio Furlanetto is a current exception - but the barrier to doing so may be more cultural-linguistic than musical.

I consider thirty recordings below – a fraction of those available and, I repeat, highly selective; if you wish to enjoy those singers I do not include, please simply disregard my tastes and be assured that I am the first to concede your right to ignore them. Most of the recordings here are made in the studio and hence free of the distractions and accidents sometimes inherent in live performances, and providing the still intensity I require in order to appreciate these miraculous songs fully.

(Incidentally, if you are prey to a certain kind of insatiable but masochistic curiosity regarding the incongruous, may I recommend that you visit YouTube to sample “Der Lindenbaum” sung by Nana Mouskouri and Shura Gehrman’s complete *Winterreise*? You will thank me...possibly...)

### The Recordings:

#### **1933: Gerhard Hüsch (baritone); Hans Udo Müller (Opus Kura; Pearl; studio – mono)**

The naturalness of Hüsch’s lyric baritone is what first strikes the listener, as opposed to the conscious artifice of the Fischer-Dieskau interpretative school. It has a beautiful, dark-hued timbre of dark which sounds like the paradigm of the oft-vaunted “natural extension of the speaking voice” and his vibrato is unobtrusive but simply there to sustain longer notes. He frequently sings softly but there is no lack of bite in moments of drama. His diction is exemplary such that meaning emerges without recourse to undue emphasis. Tempi are swift and delivery is no-nonsense, making this cycle rather terser and more concentrated than most modern versions. Hans Udo Müller’s accompaniment is limpid and flexible. The hiss and crackle in the original recording are a drawback but easily screened out by an attentive listener. I would recommend this as a supplement and antidote to the over-theatrical approach.

#### **1942: Hans Hotter (bass-baritone); Michael Raucheisen (Acanta; DG; Music & Arts; Classica d’Oro; studio - mono)**

It is noticeable in these earlier recordings that the performers are almost restrained and certainly less emotionally demonstrative than subsequent interpreters. Hotter is no exception; he simply points key words and phrases but lets the music do the work. I don’t find him the most riveting of exponents but admire his control. The sound is remarkably good for its provenance, with just the occasional bout of metallic surface noise, and the balance between piano and voice really quite acceptable, even if the latter is more prominent. Hotter is in good voice, if occasionally a bit hollow and breathy; he never at any stage of his career sounded bright, breezy and youthful but is always Wotan and rather too stentorian for our fragile lover. This is a grand, gloomy account, underpinned by Raucheisen’s steady, emphatic manner; I don’t think it captures the spirit of the music as much as perhaps it reflects the massive artistic integrity of the two artists here during dark days.

#### **1945: Peter Anders (tenor); Michael Raucheisen (Acanta; DG; studio - mono)**

First, it was recorded in the end-days of Hitler's Germany, while Michael Raucheisen, the excellent pianist here, doggedly pursued his project of recording as many Lieder as he could with artists such as Patzak and Anders who had survived the war and were still able to get to Berlin. Germany was in ruins, as the cover picture of the bombed Reichstag graphically depicts, the Russians were poised to capture the city and brutally subdue its population through a policy of mass rape and Hitler's ambitions would end in a bunker only a month or so after these recordings were completed. Yet here are two superlative Schubertians making music as if to reassert the true place and meaning of German culture before it was hi-jacked.

Secondly, in addition to Raucheisen's sensitive accompaniment, we have here an invaluable souvenir of the artistry of a great German tenor who, like Fritz Wunderlich, would die all too young - not falling down the stairs but in a road accident nine years later in 1954 when he was only 46 years old.

Thirdly, we have the chance to hear *Winterreise* sung in its original tenor version, mostly in the keys Schubert stipulated, rather than the more usual transpositions to accommodate the tessitura of other voice-types.

Finally, the interpretation itself is artistically outstanding, Anders deploying his virile tenor across a wide range of moods, tones, dynamics and colours, expertly supported by his pianist. Even the sound is more than acceptable, this having been recorded on the new technology of tape and, as such, mostly free of shatter, with only some slight distortion on louder, higher notes, a bit of sputter on sibilants and some very faint pre-echo in songs such "Im Dorfe".

Anders began his career with a lyric tenor which soon developed into a more robust and heroic instrument. His singing here is at times almost strident and often stentorian but he is equally capable of a melting pianissimo mezza voce as in "Frühlingstraum", where he sings very softly without resorting to crooning. He pays grateful attention to subtleties and nuances such as diminuendos and acciaccaturas, with all the little grace notes and telling inflections in place. His diction is crystalline and his willingness to sing out operatically means that his big voice has the capacity to strike just the right note of desperation this cycle demands. Tempi are swift and driven in a manner that complements that sense of urgency, yet in songs such as "Die Krähe" both singer and pianist hit just the right note of dreamy detachment, as the cold and isolation numb the poet's sensibilities.

Obviously, this will not satisfy those who a modern digital version but if you are tolerant of historical sound, this large-scale reading is an essential purchase for the devotee of this song cycle.

#### **1954: Hans Hotter (bass-baritone); Gerald Moore (EMI; studio - mono)**

The combination of two such artists was always bound to guarantee this recording classic status, especially as it was made in an era when choice was much more limited and I am not arguing with those who esteem it, especially as it was probably for many their gateway to the song cycle. Moore had an uncanny ability to combine unobtrusiveness as an accompanist with a deep sensitivity which ensures that his tempi, phrasing and touch always enhance the singer's delivery; just sample his dexterity, for example in that mysterious song "Die Krähe".

Nonetheless, from a modern perspective, this is even more dour than usual and Hotter's lugubrious tone has further darkened and slightly loosened since his previous recording with Raucheisen. He was already a mature artist in 1942 and a dozen years later doesn't necessarily add so much to what was already a trenchant interpretation. The sound is quite boomy and bass-biased and I cannot say that Hotter is anywhere close to being my ideal interpreter; I find that unsteadiness creeps into his line when he lightens his voice and I don't hear any great variety of colour in his dark, breathy voice, although obviously he has power a-plenty. If you want him, I recommend the earlier recording.

**1959: Hermann Prey (baritone); Gerald Moore (Jube Classic; studio – stereo)**

**1961: Hermann Prey (baritone); Karl Engel (EMI; Warner; studio - stereo)**

**1973: Hermann Prey (baritone); Wolfgang Sawallisch (Philips; studio – stereo)**

**1987: Hermann Prey (baritone); Helmut Deutsch (SWR; radio broadcast – digital)**

Hermann Prey made at least three studio recordings over his long career and there are several more live performances. They are remarkably consistent, avoiding the downward trajectory which marked Fischer-Dieskau's compulsion. For that reason, I consider four here as a group, rather than individually but marginally favour the earlier accounts. His lyric baritone was smooth but to some ears also has a rather strange, cupped, hollow sound and his detractors accused him of crooning. I understand those objections; his manner is sometimes rather unctuous and unvaried; he can sound uniformly more like a preacher than a dejected lover but at key points he certainly injects passion into his delivery of the text. He was invariably compared with his famous contemporary, sometimes to his detriment precisely because his approach to Lieder singing was the one I prefer, which places vocal beauty above verbal (over-)emphasis without sacrificing feeling. As you can see from the list above, he was fortunate in his accompanists.

The recent release from the Jube label showcases Prey at only thirty years old, in freshest voice, without so much of over-rounded sound which troubles some ears, and already paired with the doyen of accompanists, in what I presume to be Prey's first studio recording, whereas I had previously thought that the 1961 version was the earliest. I do not personally respond to his odd timbre with the same enthusiasm as I experience when listening to the brighter, more incisive sound of baritones such as Allen and Boesch but that is a matter of taste. If you do, I suggest that one of the two earlier recordings is the better bet. Obviously the sound of the 1961 studio recording is superior to the radio broadcast of two years earlier but the voicer is less mannered there.

**1962: Gérard Souzay (baritone); Dalton Baldwin (Philips; Testament; studio - stereo)**

Souzay was a famous interpreter of Lieder and some extol his *Winterreise* above all others, but I do not find his light baritone here to be as steady or effulgent as some interpreters; indeed, on first listening, I was initially taken aback by the thin nasality and hesitancy of his delivery and that impression hardly abates as the recital unfolds. Either he was not in good voice during the recording session or his timbre is more suited to the *chansons* for which he was famed. Some of that weakness appears to be as much the result of the interpretative decision to sing in a kind of beseeching half-tone as any vocal failing. Often, he simply sounds tired rather than despaired and I hear little variety in his tonal palette. Others are much more enthusiastic about this reading than I, and although I acknowledge the excellence of Baldwin's accompaniment, for me Souzay hasn't enough voice to fulfil the demands of these songs; there are a dozen versions I prefer over this.

**1982: Kurt Moll (bass); Cord Graben (Orfeo; studio - stereo)**

There is certainly no reason why a lyric basso profondo like Kurt Moll should not have given us his account, especially now that his status as one of the greatest basses of the late 20C is secure. He retired in 2006 to give master classes and died in 2017, but this recital was when he was in his relatively youthful prime in his mid-forties; he went on to sing for another quarter-century, excelling in the "lighter", more cantabile Wagner roles (Gurnemanz), Richard Strauss (Ochs), Mozart (Sarastro, Il Commendatore, Osmin) and even Verdi (Sparafucile). He was, however, equally at home in Lieder and his first recital of a selection of the more philosophical Schubert songs, also accompanied by Cord Graben and recorded again for the Orfeo label earlier in the same year as this *Winterreise*, is obligatory listening for lovers of this Fach.

His glorious voice is as sleek and smooth as a steel blade sheathed in black velvet; instantly recognisable and almost sui generis - you would never mistake Moll for another singer. His resonant

tone gave the impression of size without huge volume, while his superb diction and seamless legato allow him to create drama without percussiveness. Only very occasionally does one sense a slight struggle to keep the big voice sweet and steady.

There is of course the pertinent question of whether such an instrument is the ideal vehicle to convey the neurotic and solipsistic complaints of the archetypal desperate and disappointed Romantic lover in the Werther mode. A sonorous bass of Moll's sort is naturally more suited to conveying emotions of nobility, authority and reassurance, but the darkness is apt to the sentiments and the sheer beauty of his sound brings other compensations.

For example, the low G flats on "meinen Augen" and "saugen" in "Wasserflut" resonate with an organ-pipe depth sufficient to give any listener the chills, their profundity perfectly complementary to the sentiments of the song. Or take the slow tempo adopted for "Auf dem Flusse": one of several surprising interpretative touches which permit us to savour the gravelly lower notes contributing to a massive, monumental account somewhat different from the more usual pathetic Jeremiad. And of course, Moll's growl is perfect for conjuring up the aural image of the barking dogs in "Im Dorfe".

As in the other Schubert Lieder recording, Cord Graben's pianism is ideally subtle, sensitive and unobtrusive. No devotee of this song cycle will want to be without this magnificent version.

A full libretto and translations are provided.

### **1983: Jon Vickers (tenor); Geoffrey Parsons (Warner; studio - stereo)**

As much as I like the live recording of Jon Vickers' performance of this song cycle, made three months after this one in Canada in 1983, this studio recording made in Paris offers several advantages over it.

First, the absence of some very insensitive and intrusive coughing from the Toronto audience. Secondly, some reining in of the very extrovert manner Vickers adopted in the recital and rather less leisurely tempi; most songs here are taken rather more briskly - but by no means fast - and the duration overall is consequently some four minutes faster. Vickers still deploys his falsetto and soft singing very effectively while simultaneously suggesting great reserves of power as only his voice could, but everything is subtler here. Finally, the pianism here is more refined, more expressive and more poetic - as one might expect from that doyen of accompanists, Geoffrey Parsons - than in Toronto.

However, the VAI recording offers one great advantage: a full text in German with an English translation.

Vickers was 56 at the time of both recordings, with a career of singing Tristan, Siegmund, Florestan, Radames and Otello behind him; this is one of his last commercial recordings yet he displays astonishing flexibility and the same, deep identification with Schubert's protagonist that he showed in his assumption of those big, heroic roles. He lives his human predicament and presents an entirely absorbing and credible narrative, incorporating moments of great vocal beauty.

The bonus is a previously unpublished interview with Jon Tolansky at the Barbican in 1993. Vickers' views are notoriously conservative and he expresses them in a rather portentous manner but his sincerity is not in doubt and I prefer his candour to Tolansky's breathlessly sycophantic manner; as with his other interviews with the likes of Gheorghiu and van Dam in the EMI "Autograph" series, he never asks any question which is in the least demanding or controversial.

This recording has long been unavailable so its re-appearance as an "in memoriam" tribute to Vickers is most welcome, especially if you can buy it, as I did, at a bargain price.

**1983: Jon Vickers (tenor); Peter Schaaf (VAI; live - stereo)**

This live recording was made when Vickers was in his late fifties. The voice is still beautiful; most of the time he sings softly, almost crooning in a kind of dreamy mezza voce and then he will occasionally suddenly let loose with the kind of power that only a seasoned Wagnerian Heldentenor can produce. What makes this performance so mesmerising is the combination of very slow speeds and Vickers' evident appreciation for the import of the poetry; he relishes the words and gives them the kind of emphasis that makes them lodge in the ear.

I utterly disagree with those who accuse him of self-indulgence; he is so clearly rapt and intense that such accusations are silly; besides, he was never that kind of artist but always dedicated himself to the composer's music, not the advancement of his own ego. Some of the mannerisms which irritate his critics are in evidence: the expressive scooping and swelling approach to some long notes; the discoloration and harshness towards the top of the voice, the excessive use of head voice - but I have to say I am thoroughly convinced by his sincerity and artistry; this is a wholly personal and valid interpretation by a great singer in his maturity. The etiolated tempi create a trance-like ambience; it is only a pity that the absurdly bronchial audience could not exercise some self-control, especially during the quiet moments; they didn't deserve the devotion of such an interpreter. One almost wishes for Vickers to repeat his famous outburst to the audience in Dallas during "Tristan und Isolde": "Shut up with your damn coughing!"

My other reservation lies with the rather bland and low-key piano accompaniment; Peter Schaaf seems far too respectful to his singer, following rather than complementing him. The sound is fine for a live performance over thirty years old with very little hiss but a bit of peaking on Vickers' loudest notes.

No-one could complain that this recital lacks personality or in the least resembles the polite production-line recordings which are the bane of modern collectors. This is a treasurable - and yes, controversial - memento of his unique and magnificent voice.

**1984: Martti Talvela (bass); Ralf Gothoni (BIS; studio - stereo)**

The natural, deep resonance of Talvela's bass is closest to that of Kurt Moll and Talvela brings to the songs his usual ability to colour key words with extra weight and sonority. He can sing softly, too and his pianist shadows him sensitively in what remains a grand, sombre account. The low notes are especially striking but there is no loss of tonal quality in higher-lying passages; like Moll, there is steel in the voice. His German diction is fine. Perhaps the greatest potential weakness is some lack of expressive variety inherent in such a big, "full-on" sound and a little ungainliness in faster-moving passages but I would sooner listen to too much voice than too little. This might not be an absolute first choice but it is very satisfying.

**1986: Christa Ludwig (mezzo-soprano); James Levine (DG; studio - digital)**

Recorded in 1986 when Christa Ludwig was 58 years old, this *Winterreise* craves some indulgence for the additional wobble which has crept into her vibrato and the occasional resorting to sliding up to a note, but by and large her dark, velvety mezzo-soprano has retained its quality and remains instantly recognisable. She draws upon her vast experience to inflect the texts without undue emphasis or histrionics - and of course, her German diction is exemplary.

In her recording of this song cycle, Alice Coote, sings a tone up from Ludwig, reflecting the relative brightness of her timbre in comparison to Ludwig who here essentially sounds like a contralto. However, she is ill-served by her bland, reticent pianist Julius Drake; Ludwig, by contrast, is enormously aided in her endeavours by the powerful, flexible and consistently musical accompaniment provided by James Levine; the dark tones he conjures match those of the singer.

Despite some ultimately damaging excursions into the dramatic soprano territory, resulting in a temporary vocal crisis, Ludwig's voice has always had that alto-ish character and here she turns that to her advantage to provide gravitas and trenchancy.

I tend to refer to three or four specific, contrasting songs in this cycle to gauge the success of the whole and Ludwig passes that test in "Der Lindenbaum", "Die Krähe" and "Der Leiermann". In the first, she sings with great poise and warmth, in the second she and Levine adopt a light, whirling approach to suggest airy distraction and in the latter she quells the natural vibrancy in her tone to create the requisite chill - always the right voice and right mood for every song, but more suggestive of glacial detachment than emotional turmoil, which is psychologically valid.

This is a treasurable souvenir of a great artist in her late maturity singing what is for her still rarer repertoire.

**1987: Ian Partridge (tenor); Richard Burnett (fortepiano Vienna c. 1820)  
(Amon Ra Records; studio – digital)**

Ian Partridge also sang the cycle in an English translation but I am here confining my survey to recordings in the original language. However, this recording is in any case rather hors concours, being the only one I consider which makes a concession to the authentic movement by featuring a period fortepiano. That has its own distinctive, rather clangorous, percussive sound, and its tinkling in "Die Krähe", for example, lends it a special eeriness, but equally its limited resonance and inability to sustain tone requires the performers to adopt faster tempi than those encountered in performances on a modern pianoforte – at least ten minutes faster than most. The result is rather breathless – not that Partridge lacks breath, but he does sound rushed at times and hasn't the leisure to do much word-pointing, so key phrases can be clipped and go for rather less than they deserve. His own grainy, plaintive timbre is as distinctive as that of the piano and they complement each other, even though I prefer the richness of a Bösendorfer or a Steinway. Richard Burnett does what he can to inject feeling into his tinny instrument but opportunities are necessarily limited. The recorded sound is very close and immediate, punctuated by birds chirping – which I don't mind. Buy this to hear something different and still beautifully sung, even if it cannot be a prime recommendation.

**1988: Jorma Hynninen (baritone); Ralf Gothoni (Ondine; studio - digital)**

Gothoni is simply the best pianist I have heard in this music since Gerald Moore; his playing complements perfectly the singer's emotional range. Hynninen moves from a haunting half-voice to a more extrovert and operatic register, Gothoni shadows him, unhurried and sonorous in "Das Wirtshaus", nervy and agitated in "Im Dorfe", defiant and emphatic in "Mut". Singer and pianist are equal partners, each varying the dynamics, employing rubato and momentary hesitations to heighten or lower the emotional temperature, particularly in "Der Lindenbaum", a key, core song, whose opening affords a moment of repose before the stark intrusion of "Die kalten Winden bliesen". The culmination of the cycle is "Der Leiermann", that most haunting and disturbing of songs; Hynninen and Gothóni combine to evoke the strange beauty of the benumbed, trance-like state of a narrator "half in love with easeful Death".

This is not perhaps the most characterful or individual of interpretations, but the excellence of the accompaniment and the refinement of the singing guarantee the listener's satisfaction with it.

**1988: Brigitte Fassbaender (mezzo-soprano); Aribert Reimann (EMI; studio - digital)**

I was captivated by this recording the first time I heard it and remain so. Fassbaender's tough, resinous mezzo-soprano with its trenchant lower register lends extra verisimilitude and legitimacy to her



portrayal of a distraught young man, in the same way that similarly gifted singers in her vocal category can convincingly embody male roles originally written for castrati or haute-contre tenors like Gluck's Orfeo or, to go from the sublime to the faintly ridiculous, *en travesti* mezzos like Orlofsky in *Die Fledermaus*.

Apart from her vocal prowess – the only flaw in her armour perhaps being a tendency for her vibrato to become too broad - she is especially gifted in her ability to inflect the text with meaning and memorability; to take a random example from the first song, I love the way she rolls the double “r” in “Laß *irre* Hunde heulen”, and she always clips concluding German consonants crisply without affectation.

The freedom of composer-pianist Aribert Reimann's rubato might strike some as excessive but this is a large-scale performance of a quintessentially Romantic song-cycle by two artists at the top of their game and I much prefer their demonstrative licence to excessive restraint.

**1989: Olaf Bär (baritone); Geoffrey Parsons (EMI; studio- digital)**

I had previously under-valued both this recording and the singer who made it. The partnership between Bär and Geoffrey Parsons – successor to Gerald Moore as one of the finest Lieder accompanists in the business – is effortlessly symbiotic and the result very successful. Bär has a naturally beautiful baritone, great flexibility and agility, enabling him, for example, to execute the *gruppetti* without aspirates in “des Hauses aufgestecktes Schild” in “Die Wetterfahne” - and impeccable diction. I also like that despite moments of impressive power he is mostly prepared to sing softly. I have some minor reservations: his fast vibrato occasionally borders on a tremolo - although that slight tremor adds emotive tension - and his emphasis upon legato in combination with somewhat ponderous tempi in some songs can result in a slightly lugubrious, enervated effect in a cycle which is already inherently dark and doom-laden, but overall this is a sensitive, deeply satisfying account.

**1990: José van Dam (bass-baritone); Dalton Baldwin (Classical World; studio - digital)**

I have long loved van Dam's husky, velvety voice and this recording was made before it had begun to lose some of that smooth quality, with only a hint of the dryness which later crept in as the artist aged. Obviously he doesn't sound like a young lover here and both the lower tessitura and rather bass-heavy recording add to the sobriety and gravity of his delivery but he was only forty-nine here and sings with his customary elegance and incisiveness. His German is exemplary although his enunciation is not especially pointed. Steadiness and sustained legato were always the hallmarks of his singing and I enjoy his singing as sound per se, while acknowledging that his vocal quality is not ideally suited to the persona portrayed. Dalton Baldwin's is not much helped by the over-resonant acoustic either, and his playing comes over as a tad dull. This remains admirable but not a prime choice.

**1990: Thomas Allen (baritone); Roger Vignoles (Virgin Classics; studio - digital)**

British baritone Sir Thomas Allen's *Winterreise* is part of a Virgin Classics bargain twofer, combined with a programme of general favourites sung by American soprano Arleen Augér. As might be expected, documentation is virtually non-existent and there are of course no texts but fortunately Allen has beautiful German diction. The recording quality is good.

Thomas Allen's credentials as a master Lieder recitalist are hardly in doubt; his distinctive, faintly gruff and grainy baritone is ideally suited to delineating the quiet desperation of these songs and he is greatly assisted by the responsiveness and variety of Vignoles' pianism. Allen was in his mid-forties when he recorded this cycle and a slight dryness occasionally mars his tone but this is compensated for by his ability to provide vocal and verbal nuance and his vibrato is still quick and firm - no middle-aged wobble here.

This is yet another in a whole clutch of baritone versions, any of which might be a first recommendation depending upon personal taste in voices.

**1997: Margaret Price (soprano); Thomas Dewey (Forlane; studio - digital)**

As I discuss in my introduction above, I have no objection in principle to a lyric soprano singing this cycle but by the time Margaret Price came to record it, the bloom had gone from her voice and it has audibly declined: the middle is alarmingly husky and disembodied and has so little support that her intonation is all over the place, the top is shrill, devoid of the creaminess which marked her glory years and her lower register is non-existent. Characterisation is minimal because most of her effort is being – sadly, unsuccessfully - channelled into producing the notes. The pianist does what he can, which is very little, to salvage this disaster. It is hard to explain why Forlane ever released this, as in truth it should never have seen the light of day, it is so painful, embarrassing and detrimental to the reputation of a great artist. The *Gramophone* review on its release was inexplicably complimentary; I have rarely read anything in that august organ so wide of the mark. Enough said; moving on...

**1998: Thomas Quasthoff (bass-baritone); Charles Spencer (RCA; studio – digital)**

The now retired Thomas Quasthoff has surely the steadiest, most beautiful bass-baritone of his generation, without a trace of the Germanic throatiness which afflicts some of his contemporaries and he is capable of tempering the power and resonance of his deep instrument with refined piano singing which means he is never bombastic. His diction is exemplary and his ability to invest the text with pathos is unparalleled. Charles Spencer's accompaniment matches him for nuance and refinement. Some might want a more extrovert, demonstrative approach but I love his restraint, which relies upon cumulative impact. The sound and balance are ideal. I was not familiar with this recording before embarking in this survey but have no hesitation in awarding it the palm in this vocal category as everything about it pleases.

**2003: Christine Schäfer; Eric Schneider (studio – digital)**

I was taken immediately aback on first hearing by the perky, immoderate tempo of the opening song here and the correspondingly pert, winsome manner of Schäfer's delivery; she has a pure, bright soprano which is all very well for Mozart's *Susanna* - all cute and breathy, and as far removed from the doleful ruminations of a broken-hearted young man as we could get. Rather more gravitas and melancholy is summoned up for some of the more soulful songs such as "Der Lindenbaum" and Eric Schneider nearly busts the piano when, in attempt to create drama, he bashes out the chords at the beginning of the stanza ushering in "Die kalten Winde", but the crowd appears to be attempting to break the sound barrier instead of circling slowly over the despondent narrator's head; the performers here shave some thirty or forty seconds off the normal duration of what is already a very brief song. Sorry, but I cannot get on with it and cannot see the point of its existence, as it serves the mood, content and of the song cycle so poorly. Miss Schäfer is a fine artist in the right *Fach*; this is not it. Avoid.

**2003: Nathalie Stutzmann (contralto); Inger Södergren (Calliope; Erato; studio - digital)**

This was the final recommendation on BBC Radio 3's "Record Review" and there is always room for another *Winterreise* when the interpretation is of this quality. Stutzmann possesses a true contralto which sounds uncannily like a counter-tenor such as Andreas Scholl; the voice has rich, rounded, deep resonance but is also capable - as in the "Der Leiermann", for example - of assuming a blanched, almost vibrato-free tone to suggest desolation and emptiness. At other times, Stutzmann's voice rings out magnificently; she is very good at subtle gradations and variations. The enunciation of her German is, to my ears, impeccable, and she is sensitively accompanied by Inger Södergren, who gives the singer

time without her playing ever sounding mannered. Just occasionally, I feel that Stutzmann's vibrato becomes a little too broad, but mostly she is a model of control.

Brigitte Fassbaender is perhaps the best of all among the notable modern female interpreters; her mezzo voice is tangier than Stutzmann's deep contralto and her word-painting is even more vivid. Stutzmann is best in the more melancholy, benumbed numbers; Fassbaender excels in the more animated, stirring songs and her pianist, Aribert Reimann, is far more inclined to indulge in rubato and allow the singer freer phrasing.

Perhaps, in any case, you need several different versions of this inexhaustible masterpiece of song cycles in order to begin to plumb its depths; you could do far worse than start with this one.

**2010: Barbara Hendricks (soprano); Love Derwinger (Arte Verum; studio – digital)**

Unfortunately, this is another example of a fine and indeed beloved soprano with a formidable reputation as a Lieder singer having left it too late in her distinguished career to record her version of *Winterreise*. Here in her early sixties, her vibrato had loosened to the point of becoming an obtrusive pulse, she is unsteady and slides up to high notes and in any case, her warm, "bluesy" sound simply sounds wrong in this music; even her excursions into her lower register sound like more appropriate to *Porgy and Bess* than the more classically refined and restrained style required here, although her word-painting remains acute. Love Derwinger provides unobtrusive, bland accompaniment.

**2011: Florian Boesch (baritone); Martin Martineau (Onyx; studio - digital)**

Having been very impressed by his Schubert recital on Naxos, I was hoping for great things from Florian Boesch in this *Winterreise*, and I was not disappointed. Boesch, who is Austrian, has the kind of baritone I find most pleasing on the ear and best suited to the demands of these songs, with a keen, sharp, resonant edge and no woolliness or tight throatiness beloved of the fans of too many modern German singers. He is a Lieder singer in the fine tradition of Husch and Schlusnus.

The first thing you notice about Boesch's voice, apart from its obvious intrinsic beauty of tone, is its youthfulness and flexibility, making him ideally suited to depicting a progressively unbalanced lover of morbid sensibility. It is an evenly registered instrument, from its resonant bottom to its ringing top, light and flexible without any graininess or strain. Because it is so malleable, Boesch does not have to resort to any undue barking or percussive emphasis; for the most part he is surprisingly restrained and makes frequent use of a mellow mezza-voce, knowing that he can gun it when required, such as at the end of "Wasserflut".

He is matched by Martin Martineau, the accompanist of choice du jour for Lieder recitalists; his pianism is superb, making most of the impressionistic depictions of swirling leaves, scudding snowdrifts, barking dogs all the other examples of pathetic fallacy employed in Schubert's miraculously detailed and suggestive writing for the piano. Try the sequence of three songs beginning with no. 15, "Die Krähe" which so delicately paints the slow circling of the crows above the despaired protagonist's head, like so many vultures ready to accompany him to his grave. We move to the staccato quavers representative of dropping leaves in "Letzte Hoffnung" to the insistent figure on an alternating semitone interval conveying the yapping of guard dogs in "Im Dorfe". The famous, concluding dirge "Der Leiermann", with its 61 bar ostinato hurdy-gurdy drone, works its magic, with both pianist and singer combining to create a mood of hypnotic intensity.

This is a modern *Winterreise* which takes its place for me alongside those recordings by fellow-baritones Jorma Hynninen and Thomas Allen: subtle, sensitive and always easy on the ear without ever either prettifying or caricaturing this extraordinary music, which transmutes mental breakdown into an eerily seductive threnody.

**2012: Alice Coote (mezzo-soprano); Julius Drake (Wigmore Hall Live – digital)**

I first listened to this recital several times without quite being able to make up my mind about my reaction to Alice Coote's voice. Responses to vocal timbres are notoriously personal and I do not find myself warming to her in the same way that I immediately sit up and beg whenever I hear the inimitable tones of the other female singers who have recorded this song cycle, such as mezzos Brigitte Fassbaender and Christa Ludwig and contralto Natalie Stutzmann. This has something to do with my sense that some of Coote's vocal effects are too consciously applied - for example, the throaty sound she assumes at 2'49" in "Der Lindenbaum" on the words "Die kalten Winden bliesen"; it is like another voice and rather disconcerting. She has excellent, pointed German diction and an essentially fine instrument with a pleasing, smoky tone, but there is sometimes an edge in higher notes and she has a habit of over-emoting and punching out key words in the style of a certain celebrated, recently deceased German baritone, which I suspect is partly and subconsciously the result of her desire to compensate for the unadorned and very four-square accompaniment provided by Julius Drake.

Indeed, Drake's contribution to this recording constitutes my main objection to it. His pianism is technically excellent but emotionally almost perfunctory in comparison to that of the far freer, more expressive contributions of Aribert Reimann for Fassbaender, James Levine for Ludwig or Inger Södergren for Stutzmann.

While so many of the songs are individual masterpieces, for me, three are especially crucial to my enjoyment of any performance. The first is "Der Lindenbaum", mentioned above, and the second is that miraculous mini-psychodrama "Die Krähe". Reimann opts to adopt a faster tempo to depict the wheeling flight of the bird and thereby conveys a febrile, panicky state of mind. Södergren chooses a more leisurely pulse to suggest the slow wheeling of the crow high above; both are valid interpretations, whereas Drake, whose speed is scarcely slower than Reimann's, suggest very little at all, interpretatively speaking; nothing is happening emotionally for all Coote's efforts as she sings a ringing G flat then plunges into her lower register.

The third touchstone song is of course the concluding "Der Leiermann". Having begun in the requisite cold, detached manner, at the climax of the song Coote succumbs to the temptation to underline feeling too obviously and at the climax risks an almost ugly, sobbing sound when what is needed is a more rapt and poised conclusion; both Fassbaender - despite Reimann's fast tempo - and Stutzmann are more effective here, achieving a kind of stark, benumbed quality.

You would scarcely believe that this recording was drawn from two live performances at the Wigmore Hall; there is no audience noise I could hear and the sound is first class. If you can tolerate the stiff piano accompaniment and respond more warmly to Coote's fine mezzo than I, you will find much to enjoy in this recital of a cycle which is still only rarely performed by a female singer.

**2013: Gerald Finley (baritone); Julius Drake (Hyperion; studio - digital)**

I am a huge admirer of Gerald Finley and recognise his versatility in everything from Wagner to the Baroque. The voice is intrinsically beautiful and produced with extraordinary evenness and steadiness, with no grinding gear changes or over-emphases.

However, it is that very concern for legato and the restraint of his expression which for me constitute an element of blandness in this recording. For some, the more overt and quasi-operatic manner of Kaufmann or Florian Boesch - both of whose recent *Winterreise* releases I have just very enthusiastically reviewed - provides more variety and interest than Finley's restrained manner.

Not that his delivery of the text is in any way inexpressive; his German is superb and his nuancing of dynamics often very moving - but he is reluctant to provide the listener with anything so vulgar as a full voice, preferring to adopt a smaller-scale interpretative stance. All of this is very much a question of taste; he is ably partnered by an experienced accompanist who is sometimes rather more animated than his singer. Nonetheless, I can well understand how some might prefer Finley and have no quarrel with that, especially given the beauty of his *mezza voce*, complemented by secure, resonant low notes, a lightly flecked upper range and perfect intonation. Personally, I derive more pleasure from the greater exuberance of baritones such as Boesch, Allen and Hynninen. Admirers of Finley - of which there must and should be legion - will not be disappointed, however.

**2013: Jonas Kaufmann (tenor); Helmut Deutsch (Sony; studio - digital)**

This recording proved to be every bit as good as Kaufmann admirers had predicted - and in some ways better, as in addition to the power, beauty and colourific variety of his supple tenor, the singer brought a new subtlety and insight to his interpretation of this most challenging of song cycles. It is also true that his long-time accompanist, Helmut Deutsch, seems inspired by their partnership to produce pianism of the utmost delicacy and control.

Two years earlier Florian Boesch recorded his version and, in comparison, his light but powerful baritone is not so very different from Kaufmann's dark-hued tenor, although obviously Boesch uses lower transpositions and the voice that Kaufmann's voice has always most resembled is that of his predecessor Jon Vickers, who also recorded these songs but after so much Wagner singing, did not have the advantage of Kaufmann's flexibility. The tenor voice remains the ideal medium for this cycle, otherwise the piano, which spends so much time down in the deeper reaches of the instrument, can sound a tad muddy and the turbulent brook is transformed into oceanic depths. The technical balance and artistic collaboration between singer and pianist here are, alongside Martineau and Boesch, both the best on record; much of the time the listener is aware and appreciative of the conscious restraint they exercise to create the requisite winter chill.

Let's briefly rehearse Kaufmann's gifts: pellucid diction, wonderful legato, seamless *messa di voce* and smooth dynamic transition, almost shocking reserves of power when required - as in the last line of the opening stanza of "Die Wetterfahne", when he thunders out "sie piffen den armen Flüchtling aus" - and of course a dreamily beautiful tenor voice, with a hint of huskiness flecked with gold.

Kaufmann is often prepared to drain that beautiful voice of colour and vibrato to underline the stark despair and increasing alienation of the despaired lover from the world. He magically conjures up the simultaneously seductive and faintly menacing voice of nature, as the trees, the will-o'-the-wisp and the crow beckon to him: "Kom her zu mir, Geselle, /hier findest du deine Ruh!" Everything here is natural and unforced; the extreme, alternating strophic mood-swings of "Frühlingstraum" are effortlessly encompassed without any superfluous histrionics.

By the time we reach the final song, we are experiencing the full and authentic effect of catharsis whereby the lover's sadness transcends its tragic conclusion to achieve an unearthly beauty.

**2016: Bo Skovhus (baritone); Stefan Vladar (Capriccio; studio – digital)**

The opening song here, as with Christine Schäfer's recital, sets a challenging pace: a swift march rather than a trudge through the snow, as if the lover were running away; it's rather arresting but will strike some as interpretatively perverse. Never one to avoid emotive underlining, Skovhus can justifiably be accused of sacrificing vocal taste and elegance to cheap effects which can embrace crooning, breathy over-emphasis and barking; it is also noticeable that his vibrato loosens alarmingly when he isn't singing softly. I for one find the extremes of tempi and expression more affected than moving; Skovhus' self-conscious vocal artifice seems to me to be counter-productive, although some will find it vivid in

comparison to the delivery of more restrained artists such as Quasthoff. I for one am irked by enunciation which rolls every r and keeps squeezing every word to extract its emotive juice; I find the concluding "Der Leiermann" to be laboured to the point of absurdity rather than haunting.

Skovhus' pianist Stefan Vladar aids and abets his singer in all that primping and posing; everything is coddled and moulded to death. The very close recording intensifies the lurid and over-blown nature of this version; it's not for me but you might respond more readily to what I hear as its immoderate mannerisms.

### **Recommendations**

I suggest below recordings from six of the seven, various voice categories between soprano and bass, as I cannot in all conscience endorse any of the three soprano versions reviewed above. The artistic quality of historical recordings by such as Hüsck and Anders justifies their recommendation but only as supplementary to modern recordings, given their sonic shortcomings.

Mezzo-soprano: Brigitte Fassbaender\*

Contralto: Nathalie Stutzmann

Tenor: Jonas Kaufmann

Baritone: Florian Boesch\*

Bass-baritone: Thomas Quasthoff

Bass: Kurt Moll\*

\*First choices

### ***Ralph Moore***