



CDs

WINTERREISE Schubert

Russell Braun, baritone,
Carolyn Maule, piano.

CBC Records MVCD 1171

Schubert's late, great song cycle, *Winterreise* (he corrected the proofs of Part II on his death bed in 1828), is a very different sort of animal from the 1823 cycle *Die schöne Müllerin*, both settings of poems by Wilhelm Müller. The *Müllerin* songs, many of them classically strophic in form, trace a linear narrative, telling the tale of a feckless young man and his beloved, the "fair maid of the mill" of the title. The composer's genius raised the simple and sometimes trivial texts to a new level, essentially creating the art form of the song cycle as we know it.

While the *Müllerin* cycle is at first cheerful and optimistic, its mood turns to despair as the miller's daughter drives the young man to drown himself in a brook. By contrast, *Winterreise* is, in its entirety, one of the most thoroughly gloomy and pessimistic works of its kind (16 of the 24 songs are in minor keys). Schubert penned the cycle in two parts, and the order of the songs appears to have been arrived at by chance, since Müller himself had assembled and published the poems in piecemeal fashion. Likewise, the cycle's protagonist, a wanderer incessantly lamenting his sweetheart's faithlessness, follows an aimless path through the dark dead of winter. (His is, in fact, the only character in this drama apart from the hurdy-gurdy man

of the final song.)

The tenor voice lends itself best to the lyrical strains of *Die schöne Müllerin*, while the dark tone of *Winterreise* is best suited to the baritone timbre. The latter has had more than its share of great recordings by baritones, surely topped by Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau's awe-inspiring EMI account with Gerald Moore, from 1955. Just last year, the German baritone's compatriot, Matthias Goerne, unleashed a superb live performance with Alfred Brendel on the Decca label.

Russell Braun's eagerly awaited account is superb in every way, notable for its smooth legato, a consistent and ravishingly beautiful tone throughout the vocal range, clear enunciation and impeccable pitch. Braun is more of a mid-tone baritone than Goerne, but he sounds comfortable in every part of his range. And his singing is always tasteful, never melodramatic or swooping.

Braun evinces incredible power at climaxes such as the top F in "Wasserflut" and the optional top G in "Auf dem Flusse" (no sign of strain on a pitch that is quite high for a baritone). Where a delicate touch is required, such as in the famous "Der Lindenbaum," he is equally compelling, aided by perfectly timed accompaniment from his partner in life and music, pianist Carolyn Maule. He and Maule bring a galloping gaiety to "Die Post" (with its resonant posthorn calls), and Braun makes the odd harmonic twists of "Der greise Kopf" seem totally natural.

The singer's father, baritone Victor Braun, also recorded this cycle, with pianist Antonin Kubalek in 1992 for the Dorian label. Braun senior had a much lighter and brighter voice than his son. While he was an eminent artist in his own right, his *Winterreise* is marred by accompaniment that threatens to overwhelm him, and his singing is tentative. Simply put, it pales in

comparison with his son's impressive vision of this cycle.

This CBC recording has a beautifully balanced soundstage, with an intimate acoustic that allows, for instance, an audible intake of Braun's breath at the opening of the incredibly moving (and *sehr langsam*) "Das Wirthaus." Here is a recording that should be snatched up by all who value great Lieder singing.

—Rick MacMillan