

PROGRAM NOTES

Dichterliebe (A Poet's Love)

Composer: Robert Schumann

Poet: Heinrich Heine

Composed: 1840

Earthquakes & Islands

Composer: Andrew Staniland

Poet: Robin Richardson

Composed: 2015

Andrew Staniland's new work *Earthquakes & Islands* illuminates the "terror, anxiety, and submission" expressed in Robin Richardson's poetic collection *Sit how you want* (2014). Today's artists premiered this cycle in 2016 at the Old Stone House in Brooklyn, NY, in a co-commission between Sparks & Wiry Cries and the Brooklyn Art Song Society. Welcome to Canada's debut performances of this striking collection.

As we searched for an engaging musical pairing with *Earthquakes & Islands*, Robert Schumann's iconic song cycle on Heinrich Heine's poems of love and loss instantly sprang to mind. As these two works face each other, across a span of continents, cultures, and 175 years, a remarkable wealth of comparative revelations emerge. The passage of nearly two centuries naturally changes obvious elements: poetic vocabulary and imagery, harmonic language, and rhythmic underpinning. Perhaps most striking, though, is the expansion of vocal colours and keyboard styles since Schumann's day.

Andrew Staniland writes about the first song of *Earthquakes & Islands*,

"I loved the idea of trill and how it fit the text: A trill can be both meditative and exciting/terrifying, and the duality of a 2-note trill nicely mirrors the concepts of before and after, suggested in the title of the poem (*Meditation Before and After Living*)."

Robert Schumann might very well have found similar inspiration in creating a similar texture for the 8th song of *Dichterliebe*, in which the quivering and weeping of a broken heart is expressed in rapidly undulating intervals (*Und wüßten's die Blumen, die kleinen*). The starkest difference between the two songs is their duration. Where Schumann was a passionate miniaturist, excelling in glimpses of alternate realities, Staniland creates epic landscapes from which to explore the depth and breadth of feeling. Staniland continues,

"So off I went and wrote a piano part made up almost entirely of trills(!) that crossfade and dovetail creating a somewhat unusual piano texture that is both melodic and harmonic."

He, like Schumann, is highly rigorous as a composer. Once a choice has been made about motive and texture, both composers use the maximum potential of that idea to portray the poet's words. Here's the difference though: Schumann centres his work within the core registers of the piano, strikes complete (if *appoggiatura*-laden) harmonies, and allows the text to flow in a close approximation of its read speed. Staniland reaches out to the extremes of the

piano, subtly suggests harmonies, and examines elements of the text via repetition and fragmentation, and both highly energized and meditative vocal gestures.

“The music at a wedding procession always reminds me of the music of soldiers going into battle.” - Heinrich Heine

Robin Richardson writes that her poetic collection, *Sit how you want*, “is mainly about power and sex, with a slight political preoccupation.” While Heinrich Heine’s *Lyric Intermezzi* may not muse explicitly on power or politics, they certainly do explore sexual desire and regret. The two poets share in a sense of resentment, in a feeling of powerlessness, and a lingering appreciation of the irony that love’s pleasure can lead to such pain. Despite these seemingly dour preoccupations, they both also find beauty in the intrinsic value of hope lying at the core of despair.

Finally, our juxtapositions of Schumann and Staniland, Heine and Richardson, and these works as sung by soprano and baritone, all have expanded our awareness of gender associations and historic trends in the performance of *Dichterliebe* and inclusive approaches to storytelling in the 21st century. It is fascinating to reconsider Schumann/Heine’s creation in the soprano voice - *Dichterliebe* was dedicated to a soprano! - and to be invited into a more holistic understanding of the human experience of love and betrayal.