Schumann

Songs vol. 7
Four Duets op. 34
Myrten op. 25
'John Anderson' op. 145 no. 4
Four Duets op. 78

Dorothea Röschmann *sop* Ian Bostridge *ten* Graham Johnson *pf*
Polyphony
Stephen Layton
Hyperion CDJ33107 (78 minutes: DDD), £14.99
Notes, texts and translations included.

Collected editions such as Hyperion's current project to record the complete songs and accompanied part-songs of Robert and Clara Schumann can easily produce discs of uneven quality, but for devotees of the Lied, and of great singing in general, this issue is well worthwhile. Its main content is the cycle of 26 songs, *Myrten* op. 25, Schumann's wedding gift to Clara in 1840. The disc is topped and tailed by two duet sets of four numbers (opp. 34 and 78), and also includes, after the *Myrten* cycle, a refreshing a cappella setting of Burns ('John Anderson' op. 145 no. 4) from 1849, though published posthumously in 1860. The nearest comparable enterprise of a mixed-voice version of *Myrten* is probably the Dawson/Partridge Chandos recording (with pianist Julius Drake) from 1994.

The pure pleasure of listening is one thing, but many will want to get some orientation of the songs on this disc, not least given the broad selection of eight poets Schumann made for *Myrten*, all the way from the sentimental Burns translated into German, to the mordant Heine in those songs where Schumann wanted depth and piquancy as well as the attractiveness, wit, and ebullient proliferation of thought and image that he stitched into his compositional fabric so unforgettably elsewhere. It was a bold stroke of Schumann's to enrich the 'song-cycle' genre of the single author, customarily said to have been consolidated by Beethoven and Schubert, with the literary miscellany of *Myrten*, bold but fashionable in that the 'collection', of music or of poetry, was all the rage in what Adorno called the early days of the age of the European potpourri in his great essay 'Schubert'; yet, Schumann clearly constructed some kind of plot here, for there is undoubtedly an erratic narrative over this 'Lied universe' of three quarters of an hour of music. Indeed scholars, such as Sams, have discerned an overarching musical scheme in, most obviously, the tonal design, though a closer look at the intertextual relations between words and music reveals more complex narrative strategies. The deviser and pianist of this Hyperion project, Graham Johnson, provides a full contextual background in a generous booklet of more than a hundred pages that is packed with historical and critical information, visual material, and potted guides to the poets. This is an unusually informative, useful and very welcome resource. All the same, it betrays its milieu like any other, with its doggedly Toveyan approach. And despite paying lip-service to the musicological context – for instance with a rather interesting introductory essay on the interactions of Schubert, Mendelssohn, and Schumann

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as Lied composers – it manages to avoid discussion (almost entirely) of less well-rehearsed areas such as the sociological context of the Lied, including the music of Schumann's long-forgotten contemporaries that he evidently considered in detail (since he reviewed them penetratingly in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*), or the music of women composers that was rarely even published (how many of Fanny Henschel's songs did Schumann know, one wonders?); or indeed the whole area of Schumann reception (notably how his music has been played and sung) over more than a century and a half.

The performances from the singers are warm and virtuosic, not only in their consummate technique, but especially in their subtlety, where all temptation towards either the over-sentimental or the over-theatrical – in short, the lures of the salon – are avoided. There is not only an inherent match of the different voices, but also a perfection of balance and interpretative interaction, which is complemented by the sound engineer's creation of a perfect vocal acoustic. As to vocal ensemble, the disc hits the ground running, with a sensuous rendering of the 'Liebesgarten' duet. There are perhaps moments in *Myrten* where each singer sounds a little less authoritative, in, for example, Bostridge's 'Du bist wie eine Blume' (no. 24 of *Myrten*) – one of the greatest of Schumann's solo songs – or Röschmann's 'Weit, weit' (no. 20), but there is so much singing of truly superb quality to be enjoyed here that momentary imperfections are barely noticeable.

The very heights of artistry on the singers' part, and fine technical production of these recordings, make the dull piano playing all the harder to enjoy, especially when time and again Schumann's piano becomes its own 'voice' and offers – if played with thought and intensity – the uniquely poetic meanings that other great players (such as Brendel or Eschenbach with Fischer-Dieskau) have been able to bring to life from the printed page. For some listeners this lack of a singing piano will spoil an otherwise notable addition to the catalogue.

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Tchaikovsky

Tchaikovsky for four hands Symphony no. 4 in F minor op. 36 (transcription by Sergei Taneyev); *Romeo and Juliet* (transcribed by Nadezhda Purgold/Mme Rimsky-Korsakov); Sixteen from Fifty Russian Folk-Songs (10, 12, 13, 17, 18, 19, 23, 27, 31, 32, 33, 34, 42, 47, 48, 49)

Anthony Goldstone and Caroline Clemmow *pf*
The Divine Art 25020 (69 minutes: DDD), £12.99
Notes included.

The three components of this CD of music for four hands at one piano are distinct. The only fully Tchaikovskian element is his 1868–69 arrangement of Russian folk songs. There is some merit in offering a selection grouped into two CD tracks – especially as the choice emphasizes well-known songs. Besides these arrangements, we have transcriptions of compositions by Tchaikovsky

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