

National Centre for Early Music

Tuesday 13 August 2024

3.00 pm

**Exploring episodic narratives in
Carl Loewe's ballads**

Stuart M O'Hara *bass-baritone*

Jess Dandy *contralto*

Ioanna Koullepou *piano*

Edward op.1, no.1
Erlkönig op.1, no. 3
Herr Oluf op. 2, no. 2
Die nächtliche Heerschau op. 23
Der Todtentanz op. 44, no. 3
Wallhaide op. 6
Elvershöh op. 3, no. 2
Hochzeitlied op. 20, no. 1
Der Zauberlehrling op. 20, no. 2

***short interval**

Archibald Douglas op. 128
Tom der Reimer op. 135
Odins Meeresritt op. 118

I dedicate this recital to my family who cannot be here today, as the minimum appreciation for their support throughout these years.

This recital presents the primary outcomes of my practice-based PhD project investigating performing practices in the piano accompaniment of Carl Loewe's ballads. It offers an opportunity to explore the practical implications of the written research which draws together contextual issues, such as textual and musical analyses, the historical background of the ballad genre, the compositional style of the composer, and how some of the historically informed performance practice movement's facets can apply experimentally to the interpretation of these ballads. The tools I am using are the instruments' variety of colours, rhythmic alteration, arpeggiation, and the fluctuations of tempo which accompany the singer's declamatory style of interpretation.

Carl Loewe (1796-1869) was a composer and singer born in Löbejün, a town north of Halle, Germany. Although Loewe was primarily known for his singing ability, he was also a skilled pianist, and those around him viewed him as a confident interpreter, with particular expertise in self-accompaniment. Schumann, for instance, talked about Loewe's ability to musically paint the text and to engage with different topics which he was able to communicate differently through each instrument, voice and piano. Another distinctive characteristic of Loewe's ballads is his improvisatory style. The presence of mimicry and pictorialism and their elaboration in music using long introductions, embellishments, high and low

tessituras, and detailed expressive indications, make each story more vivid and give Loewe's music an improvisational character.

As a performer in this research project, I took the individual features of Loewe's musical style as devices for creating dramatic interpretations. They provided the opportunity of experimenting with the possibilities of creating the imaginary scenarios that emerge from these ballads, suggesting freedom and intimate communication between singer and pianist. Based on historical evidence with a direct impact on the interpretation of this style but also based on reflective and collaborative rehearsal process, these results are presented today as suggestions for interpretation and not as a dogmatic approach to performance. The most important result is a performance that aims at showing the shift from a 'literal' to a more flexible and freer interpretation of the notation inspired by the historical evidence on Loewe's style, as well as the performance practices of the period.

Edward
op. 1, no. 1 (1818/1824)

J. G. Herder
After Scottish text

A mother asks her son Edward three times about the blood on his sword. At first, he claims that he killed his hawk, then his horse but finally admits that he killed his father. After that, Edward announces he is leaving and will never return. Finally, when his mother asks what will become of her after his departure, Edward replies: 'a curse from hell will fall on her' as he reveals her involvement in the murder.

Erlkönig
op. 1, no. 3 (1818/ 1824)

J. W. von Goethe

The ballad begins with the sound of 'rustling leaves' and the image of a father and son riding fast. Based fundamentally on questions and answers, Loewe distinguishes the three main characters, giving particular emphasis on Erlkönig, the ballad's supernatural character. The fortepiano's pedals help to reinforce the differences between Erlkönig, son and father, which combined with a declamatory singing style, communicate the emotional state of each character.

Herr Oluf
op. 2, no. 2 (1821/ 1824)

J. G. Herder
After Danish text

This is the tale of a rider, Herr Oluf, who is invited by a supernatural woman, the Erlkönig's daughter, but he cannot imagine the ruin caused by his denial.

Loewe's setting is remarkable, distinguishing clearly the riding figure from the elves' dance, showing the warnings, establishing the curse, and connecting the trembling mother with the dramatic bride who finds her bridegroom dead.

Die nächtliche Heerschau
op. 23 (1832/ 1833)

J. C. F. von Zedlitz

The poem refers to the year of 1812, when Napoleon invaded Russia and because of the 'General Winter', amongst other factors, French soldiers, as well as soldiers from other campaigns, perished. The macabre subject is demonstrated in the very first bars, which Loewe sets in such a way that we can conceive of the image of the dead drummer coming out of his tomb, followed later by the other soldiers.

Der Todtentanz
op. 44 no. 3 (1835)

J. W. von Goethe
Improvisation

The tower keeper watches over the cemetery at night while the dead come out of their graves to perform the dance of death. Stealing a shirt from one of the dead, the tower man runs into the church. Particularly evocative is the vignette where the shirt's skeletal owner pursues him. Modulations to remote keys accompanied by a flexible tempo create the resonance of the upcoming end; the church bell strikes one o'clock and the skeleton falls and smashes into the churchyard.

Wallhaide
op. 6 (1819/ 1826)

C. T. Körner
Improvisation

The poem tells a love story, that of a girl, Wallhaide, and her beloved young knight, Rudolph, a relationship of which her father did not approve. However, Wallhaide rests her hope on the same faith and hope her ancestor (Wallhaid) showed in the story she begins to narrate. Although this separate story sounds very similar to Wallhaide's story, the difference is that Wallhaid's father, after ordering her lover's death, kills his daughter too. Wallhaid's spirit cannot find rest, and through the last part of the ballad and the next encounter of the two lovers, the listener understands that the two stories meet; Wallhaide is a spirit and Rudolph sinks into the grave with her.

Elvershöh
op. 3, no. 2 (1825)

J. G. Herder
After Danish text

The plot begins with the story's protagonist, a warrior, lying down in Elvershöh which geographically is a suburb in Norway. While his eyes start drooping, two maidens appear singing to him with silvery tone and spreading their magical sound towards all the participants of that landscape (fish, birds). The maidens want, through their song, to teach the warrior how to use magic and become powerful. The warrior sits silent, and the maidens take his reaction as an insult and, therefore, they want to kill him.

Hochzeitlied
op. 20, no. 1 (1832)

J. W. von Goethe

The celebratory mood of a marriage is clearly depicted in the opening and end of this ballad. Rhythmical alteration is incorporated in these sections by the piano accompaniment to convey the feeling of dance, celebration and happiness. As the text progresses, the music becomes busier expressing the party the little dwarfs are organising.

Der Zauberlehrling
op. 20 no. 2 (1832)

J. W. von Goethe
Improvisation

The old sorcerer leaves his workshop, giving his apprentice chores to do. The apprentice uses magic he is not fully trained in to get a broom to carry out the tasks for him. The result is a flooded workshop. When all seems lost, the old sorcerer returns and breaks the spell.

Archibald Douglas
op. 128 (1858)

T. Fontane
Based on Scottish story

The curtain rises on Douglas after his seven years exile by King James, who cast him out not because of his own acts but because of his Kinsmen's fraud. The fundamental theme is Douglas's desire to return to his fatherland, for which he must beg King James for forgiveness. By recalling the joyful times they spent together in Linlithgow Castle, Douglas tries to move

the King who at the end is touched by Douglas's love for his country and forgives him.

Tom der Reimer
op. 135 (1867)

T. Fontane
After Scottish text

The piano's long introduction sets the scene of the ballad. Tom sits near the brook and suddenly he sees an enchanting woman who is accompanied by an elaborated piano part depicting the sound of silver bells. A dialogue between the two follows and the lady reveals her identity; she is the Queen of Elves and Tom agrees to serve her for seven years in exchange for one kiss.

Odins Meeresritt
op. 118 (1854)

A. W. Schreiber

A call in the middle of the night disturbs the blacksmith Oluf. It is a knight who wants Oluf to shoe his horse so that he can arrive to Norway by sunrise. Oluf believes the knight's request to be impossible, but he does as he is asked. Then Oluf realises that the knight is the god Odin who at the end bids farewell and rides fast to the bloody battle.

A big thank you...

... to Stuart and Jess for being wonderful singers and I was privileged to accompany them...

... to my supervisors Prof. Peter Seymour and Dr. Mark Hutchinson for their insightful guidance...

... to the accomplished instrumentalists and teachers Steven Devine, Hilary Suckling, and Andrew Snedden who enriched my knowledge of the interpretation of this repertoire...

... to the recording engineers and the rest of the technical team of Arts and Creative Technologies of the Music department...

... to members of staff of the Music department of Arts and Creative Technologies who helped with the logistics...

... to the National Centre for Early Music for giving me the opportunity to perform in this beautiful space and for Ken Forrest's piano tuning services...

... to all my friends, those who practically assisted me and emotionally supported me, and my family for their love, understanding, patience and contributions throughout these years...

... and finally, to all of you for coming here today!