



Discovering a gold mine: Eastman collaborators Robert Wason and Valerie Errante uncover the beauty of the Munich School's Romantic songs.

Rediscovering a lost art

Romantic music may be a thing of the past according to the history books. Yet it enchants audiences now as much as it did a century ago. Fortunately, musicians are finding that there's still more adventure to be had in this repertoire. For the last decade, soprano Valerie Errante and pianist Robert Wason have been exploring a treasure trove of virtually unknown Romantic songs by early 20th-century South German composers: the Munich School. Errante and Wason present the fourth installment of their findings in a recital this Thursday, July 17.

Wason, dismayed by most scholars' fixation on "genius" composers, has long been interested in exploring late-19th and early-20th-century music he hasn't heard before, even if it's not composed by so-called geniuses. Originally, Wason was drawn to the compositions of Munich-based Ludwig Thuille (1861-1907) because his own composition teacher had studied in Munich in the 1930s, and because Thuille was co-author of an important book on 19th-century harmony — one of Wason's long-standing scholarly interests.

Returning to the US in 1993 after singing in German opera houses for 10 years, Errante took a doctorate at the Eastman School, where she met Wason, then, as now, a professor of Music Theory. Errante expressed interest in interpreting Romantic songs from Vienna.

"I told her that I thought Vienna was pretty well mined," Wason says, "but that there was a completely unknown repertoire of music from Munich. Honestly, I had no idea just how large it was. That summer she went back to Europe... when she came back with 400 pages of music [from Munich's library], we began reading through the pieces." And the duo began performing them in 1995. Each recital takes two or three years of planning. "At this rate, our archive will probably outlive us!" Errante says.

Thursday's recital includes songs from 1899 to 1914 by five composers including Thuille, the central figure of the Munich School and a close friend of Strauss. Other composers featured are Walter Braunfels, a student of Thuille's; Max von Schillings, who conducted the premiere of Braunfels's first opera; and Rudi Stephan, a student of Thuille's coauthor Rudolph Louis.

Braunfels's song, *from the 'year of the soul'*,

Classical

by Josh Mailman

sets a poem by the innovative Stefan George. George's heated erotic poems are known nowadays as favorites of Schoenberg and Webern. (Film buffs may recognize George as the vain but charismatic poet who is parodied hilariously in Fassbinder's 1976 slapstick *Satan's Brew*.)

The emotional intensity of the poetry, by George and his contemporaries, influenced not only the composition of the songs but also their performance. "At the turn of the century, singers performed this repertoire with a great deal of heightened emotion — often sobbing or crying out while singing," Errante says. "By 1920, the style of performance of Lieder [songs] had changed to the point that the exaggerated style of the Munich School was seen as excessive and out-moded."

About the music itself, Wason adds: "The late-Romantic style was the victim of the end of World War I. 'Old Europe' was felt to be passé — even before Don Rumsfeld — with the end of the Great War; the onslaught of Modernist artistic styles dealt a death-blow to the 'remnants' of late Romanticism."

Then in the 1960s Leonard Bernstein revived Mahler's music in the US. And since the 1990s London/Decca has been issuing a series of CDs of music banned by the Nazis: lesser-known Austrian and German composers such as Zemlinsky, Schreker, and Braunfels. Even arch-minimalist Philip Glass seems to be reviving Romanticism. The third movement of his film soundtrack *Naqoyqatsi* (2002) emulates the opening of Zemlinsky's *Lyric Symphony* (1922).

It appears that a "resurrection" of late Romanticism is well underway. Without Errante and Wason's musical archeology, however, the songs for voice and piano would remain underrepresented in this ongoing revival. As long as their exploration continues, we can continue to enjoy these musical gems: the songs of the Munich School. ■

Songs of the Munich School recital, 7:30 p.m. (note early starting time), Thursday, July 17, at Eastman School of Music's Kilbourn Hall, 26 Gibbs Street. Free. 274-1100.