

The singer's dance of death

The greatest of song cycles - Schubert's *Winterreise* - has been given a radical new look by baritone Simon Keenlyside and choreographer Trisha Brown. They explain to Ismene Brown

Last Updated: 1:35PM BST 12 Sep 2003

Two young men died, a year apart. One was 32, and died suddenly; the other was 31, and his death was expected. They did not know each other, but between them they created the most moving work about young men and death that exists in music, perhaps in any art.

The work is *Winterreise*, the "winter's journey" described in 1828 by Franz Schubert's music and Wilhelm Müller's poetry. In a narrative over 24 songs, a young man wanders through wintry landscape, thinking of the girl he loves but who threw him over for someone richer. Isolated by his pain, hallucinating with cold, he sinks, increasingly disorientated, into his suffering, until... what? Suicide? It is easy to think so.

Schubert, months before he died from complications of syphilis, told his friends: "I am going to sing to you a cycle of terrifying songs." The final song, as a beggar plays his hurdygurdy in the snow, cannot fail to pierce anyone who hears it. No wonder *Winterreise* has drawn every male singer of note (and one or two females too) to stand by a piano and summon up its wild, dark, grief-struck imaginative world.

The British baritone Simon Keenlyside is, at 43, a first-league star of Covent Garden and the Metropolitan, opera houses and concert halls all over Europe and America. Alongside his *Don Giovanni*, *Papagenos* and *Pelléases*, he feels passion for German *Lieder*, and has sung the greatest of them, Schubert's *Winterreise*, many times (most recently, last month at the Edinburgh Festival).

But he set himself – and the public – a provocative challenge when he asked the American modern dance-maker Trisha Brown to give Schubert's masterpiece a choreographic makeover, involving himself singing and dancing with three of her dancers. Its New York première last winter was the season's most surprising hit. It sold out nine performances, when, Keenlyside says wryly, a conventionally sung *Winterreise* would struggle to sell two.

Now Britain has its chance to see the unusual collaborative work the Barbican co-commissioned, in performances in London and Newcastle. It will certainly attract a public not often seen at *Lieder* recitals, but when I met Keenlyside in New York last month (he was invited back again for further *Winterreises*), he insisted that he has not the remotest interest in "updating" an old-fashioned art form for "new audiences".

"As a New York critic said to me a year ago, 'So what is it, Mr Keenlyside, that you feel is lacking in *Winterreise* that you should feel the need to dance in it?' And it is a very good question! But it wasn't like that.

"I get a bit belligerent about it: there is no better way to do a recital than with a piano and a singer – dress code aside – on a platform. If you were reciting poetry, you wouldn't do anything other than pin people to their seats with inflection, with nuance, with subtlety – in their own language, of course.

"There is the problem: this work is in German. And we English have a reputation in the opera world for being good theatre animals, I think it's because we deal constantly in foreign languages. But you can fall into a tendency to mum and mug your meaning to the audience."

Keenlyside sought another way. In 1998 he had been singing Monteverdi's *Orfeo* at the Barbican, which Trisha Brown choreographed in the abstract allusiveness for which she is world-renowned. "I was floored by its sensitivity," he says, and so he asked her to do *Winterreise* with him.

Brown, whose reticence disguises her record as one of modern dance's chief radicals, hesitated. "No one knows better than me just how Schubert doesn't need my dancing," she told me, laughing shyly. "What a brazen thing to do! But they asked me and I did it the best I could."

This was a quite different animal from the dances she makes with her own company, which can be seen in

London's Dance Umbrella season next month. First, Brown, like many choreographers, draws on her dancers' intimate familiarity with her likes and dislikes, aesthetic preferences and expressive pitch. Keenlyside has none of this training, and yet he had the courage – and physical flexibility – to take an equal part in Brown's spare, intricate bodily weavings. And there are some extraordinary flashes – singing while lying suspended by the dancers in one song, executing a dazzling flying leap in another.

"The little jumpy thing," he says self-deprecatingly, "I knew I had to do it. At first I didn't know how to land on the ground without hurting myself. The things that they do naturally – left arm here, right leg something different – I found that a nightmare. And then trying to sing on top of it."

Brown, having worked on two operas recently, explained that for singers, she works out "rudimentary choreographies", while greatly adjusting what her dancers will perform because of the dominance of the words (which are projected in English on stage).

In *Winterreise*, images are put under high magnification: a crow, a signpost, a leaf on a tree, a mirage of three suns. Schubert carries the effect of these short poems far beyond sentimentality – with incredible economy, he spins music that grips the heart icily, cracks in geysers of tears, or falters in insanity.

Brown, fearful of over-egging such high-strung Romanticism, took a cerebral route, researching poetic and musical forms, weighing the obviousness of having dancers flap their arms in *The Crow* with the subtler puzzle of how to show the girl who causes all the mayhem. She does both magically, as she solves the climactic *Hurdygurdy Man* – and Jennifer Tipton's superlative lighting plays nearly as great a part.

Why Brown accepted such a challenge to the creative radicalism of her own work lies in her emotional background. As a child in the Washington forests, she spent six years isolated from people by illness. "It's true I was drawn to the sadness in the music, the melancholy, that comes from my childhood. That very beautiful, natural scene, rainforests, springtime – that environment does give you an internal portion, which becomes part of your work."

There was, later, for a mother with a son, the parental perspective: young men are particularly prone to fatal despair, now, as two centuries ago.

"Yes, suicide is one of those sidelined tragedies. Americans don't deal well with mental illness. I've thought about it a lot."

Undeniably there's a morbid temptation to read runes in the fact that on his deathbed Schubert was correcting the *Winterreise* proofs. He was only 25 when he contracted the terminal sexual disease – putting an end to marriage prospects, although he had hundreds of compositions still to come. Short, fat, plain and short-sighted, he had a loving character and many friends, and his painfully extended decline is so lightly worn in his sublime music that it seems a peculiarly unfair death.

Müller's heart attack at 32 was, by contrast, unexpected, and he wrote his plangent poems not from any intimations of mortality but in the Romantic fashion of the Germany of his time. His liberal-nationalist writings were frequently banned or censored, but by his mid-twenties he was well-paid, successful and well-connected when he penned the two cycles, *Die schöne Müllerin* and *Winterreise*, which Schubert discovered in periodicals and immortalised.

Müller did not know of Schubert's embellishment of his poems, far away in Austria. Shortly before the dying composer finished his "terrifying" songs, the poet was struck dead.

- *Winterreise* is at the Barbican, London EC2 (020 7638 8891), Sept 16 and 18, and Theatre Royal, Newcastle (0870 905 506), Sept 20. Trisha Brown Dance Company is at Sadler's Wells, London EC1 (020 7863 8000), Oct 6-8.

Related Articles

- [14 May 2003: Sweet prince of song \[on Keenlyside's operatic Hamlet\]](#)
- [14 May 2003: Something misbegotten in this state of Denmark \[review of Hamlet at the Royal Opera House\]](#)
- [27 January 2003: No path and no pantomime \[Rupert Christiansen reviews Die Zauberflöte at the Royal Opera House\]](#)

Covent Garden

- [Anguish of parents whose daughter died after taking overdose of drugs bought online](#)
- [Other TV highlights: weekend 25/26 April](#)
- [Family seek relatives of hero British soldier who saved Italian woman's life](#)

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/opera/3602564/The-singers-dance-of-death.html>