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Another Side of Elly Ameling

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Baden bei Wien

Music lovers the world over know and admire the great performing artist Elly Ameling, but this evening we are also celebrating, with equal fervor, the great teacher Elly Ameling. If you have ever heard her singing, you have experienced a beauty and authenticity that is truly unforgettable. And there are millions of people around the world who have had this experience. A much smaller number know her as a teacher, but those fortunate few have experienced a powerful encounter that is equally rare and exquisite and transformative. The gifts and legacy of the teacher are just as precious and lasting as those of the performer. So let us now celebrate the foremost mentor of the Lied in our time.

In the summer of 1978 Elly Ameling answered the call to join us in creating a new academy for advanced study of the Lied. At that time, my wife and I founded the Franz-Schubert-Institut, located in Baden bei Wien, Austria, in order to enable young singers and pianists to perform Lieder in the spirit in which they were composed—that is, as manifestations of an intimate union of poetry, music, and the Naturphilosophie of Goethe and the Romantic Era. This approach was in tune with the work of Elly Ameling, Hans Hotter, and Jörg Demus, who all agreed to participate in this venture, together with two great actresses from the Vienna Burgtheater: Julia Janssen and Elisabeth Kallina, who contributed their genius of speaking the poetic texts of the songs.

Now, Elly Ameling has, for the last 35 years, been the very heart of this special summer academy. For she truly embodies the highest qualities of the German Lied as the expression of the Romantic soul. She is our most genuine voice of Mignon and Mignon's *Sehnsucht*—that pure longing of the heart for union with the Absolute Beloved, that burning desire to know and to be known, which consumes us and inspires our best songs, both spiritual and erotic at the same time. Elly Ameling has given us Mignon and Gretchen and Suleika and all the souls of Eichendorff and Höltly and Mörike. She has given us the truth of Schubert, Schumann, and Brahms, because she is a truth-teller. Truth-tellers never sing for their own glamour and glory, they never ingratiate or flatter, they have no hidden agendas and no selfish possessive desires. In fact, the singular self disappears like Ganymed and the Greater Self—the All-loving Father who has no name—takes possession of his chosen prophets. And then Goethe speaks, Schubert plays, and Ameling sings. Or rather, Universal Creative Love—at once spiritual and



Ek van Zanten, *Florestan and Eusebius* (bronze, 1987)

sensual—speaks and plays and sings in and through these geniuses. As Goethe tells us: the Whole is present in every part.

So Elly Ameling is our great mentor in Baden bei Wien, because she tells and shows young singers and pianists that this music is not about the ego of the performer. The songs do not belong to you, but you can walk the path that will let you belong to the songs. It is a hard path of awareness and discipline. *Sehnsucht* must never be self-pity or sentimentality—it is the fire in the heart that we suffer when we love. *Sehnsucht* might be rendered in English as longing for the distant Beloved, and this “longing” is a deep desire to “be-long.” And again, the song doesn’t belong to me, but rather I belong to the song, which lives in and through me. This is the path and the teaching of Elly Ameling. And then even a third level can be attained: the enlightenment of total mutuality—living and performing in the real presence of mutual belonging. As Goethe pointed out: blue and yellow (the two primal colors) can only exist in mutual presence—the colors of the sky and the sun create and sustain each other—the necessary complement of sustaining presence. This, too, is the way of the great teacher, the truth-teller.

Some years ago, Elly Ameling suggested to me that, when I am looking for qualified participants for FSI, I should listen for two key attributes in their singing: the legato line and the heart. At that time, I thought legato line was simply a desirable musical style, one on which Hans Hotter also insisted, but I have learned that legato line is an expression of truthfulness. And when singers in their attempt to sing clearly and with correct diction neglect or destroy the legato line, I do not believe them. Truth dwells in connection, not in isolated words. Similarly, the truth of the heart—which is genuine compassion, fellow feeling, and selfless empathy with all creatures—is manifest in the tone itself. There is an ineffable quality in the tone of the voice that is truth itself. The “heart” Elly Ameling means is not showy feelings or theatrical sentiment, but rather genuine human kindness and honestly caring about all the natural world with its beauty and its suffering. Heart is the singing tone of integrity, of Mignon, of the *schöne Seele*, that we so desperately need in the world today. Heart is, in Goethe’s words, the manifestation of an “*offenbares Geheimnis*,” an integrity of the soul in nature. You can hear it on the voice. As Robert Schumann suggested: the poem must lie in the voice of the singer like a bride lies in the arms of the bridegroom—freely, openly, and completely.

In the 35 years of our work together, Elly has been a pioneer in forging a path for lovers of the Lied from the Netherlands to its summer homeland in Baden bei Wien. She has led the way for Rudolf Jansen and Robert Holl, for Jan Willem Nelleke and Frans Huijts, but also for Lenneke Ruiten and Thom Janssen. It is a wonderful and fruitful connection!

Elly, we honor your integrity, your poetic sensibility, your wonderful gifts as a teacher; we thank you for your generosity, your loyalty, and your humanity. May you long continue to flourish in this great work! Shanti!