

## Audio Review

*Voyage d'hiver: Franz Schubert/Wilhelm Müller, Winterreise, op. 89, D. 911.* B Records LBM057, 2024. [Spotify: <https://tinyurl.com/4a3ywewy>]

Lieder performed in the order imagined by the poet and translated into French by Antoine Thiollier. Public recording on July 30, 2023, at the Ferme de Villefavard. Conception and artistic direction by Baptiste Chouquet and Rémy Gassiat.

Performers: Miroir Étendus—Victoire Bunel (mezzo-soprano), Jean-Christophe Lanièce (baritone), Romain Louveau (piano)

The genesis of Franz Schubert's *Winterreise*, as well as scholarship into the cycle's performance history, provide historical inspiration for modern performances of the cycle that might break with its final published order. In the first case, it is notable that Schubert's composition ultimately diverged from the final published order of the twenty-four-poem-cycle of Wilhelm Müller on which it is based. During 1827, Schubert first apparently worked from Müller's earlier publication, in 1823, of just twelve *Winterreise* poems. He then discovered later in the compositional process the final publication by Müller of twenty-four poems in volume two of *Gedichte aus den hinterlassenen Papieren eines reisenden Waldhornisten* from 1824, which also contained some changes to the order of the first twelve. Schubert held on to his original ordering of the first twelve, adjusting then the list of the remaining twelve poems to create a cycle in which all were included.<sup>1</sup> Thus, while Schubert did arguably create his own dramaturgy through his final compositional decisions, the presence of an alternative order in Müller's final cycle suggests an alternative narrative that could be interesting for the cycle's performance. If we add to that the fact that throughout the nineteenth century, most public performances of *Winterreise* contained only a partial group of the songs (and these not in a strict order)—as Natasha Loges has demonstrated—then

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1. See, for example, Richard Kramer, *Distant Cycles: Schubert and the Conceiving of Song* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 151.

performance history also adds a layer of inspiration for approaches to the cycle today that would either excerpt from or reorder the songs.<sup>2</sup>

In the performance project *Voyage d'hiver*, pianist and artistic director Romain Louveau places Schubert's songs in Müller's order, and in the voices of two different singers, to investigate questions of voice, persona, and the personal, as well as to shed possible new light on the cycle in other ways. The live performance project involved a specific lighting design and projected poetic surtitles (in French, as the songs were still sung in German), including some surtitles that commented on the cycle or at times gave up translating. The only documentation that I have at hand to review the project, however, is the published CD recording with an accompanying booklet. The booklet includes a thorough interview with Louveau about the project as well as a pleasant abstract artwork on the rear side. Given this media situation, this review will comment on the concept, even as it focuses ultimately most on the artistic impression of the recorded songs in the alternate dramaturgy of Müller's poetic order.

In addition to noting issues in the lighting design and the nature of the projected translations, Louveau also explains in the booklet that the division of the cycle into two separate singers' voices aims to depersonalize the sung text. Given ongoing discussions in Lied performance and scholarship about whether songs like those in the cycle center on a specific character or even "acted" role, or a more generalizable subject position, this idea presents an interesting intervention in the cycle's performance.<sup>3</sup> The choice of which singer would sing which song followed a simple rule, as opposed to a more interventionist creative decision: the mezzo-soprano, Victoire Bunel, was assigned all of the songs of Schubert's book one (the first 12), and then the baritone, Jean-Christophe Lanièce was given the remaining songs in book two (the second 12). Once the performers presented these groups of songs in Müller's order instead, an uneven alteration between the two performers and voice types added interest to the program. Louveau claims that this ordering "lets us hear the two trajectories because one can still discern Schubert's rhythm by following the appearances of each singer, whilst being caught up in the interplay which Müller's order re-establishes and which certainly moderates the deliberate pessimism of the Schubertian layout." For my ears—quite familiar with Schubert's original—the first of these claims did

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2. See Natasha Loges, "Detours on a Winter's Journey: Schubert's *Winterreise* in Nineteenth-Century Concerts," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 74, no. 1 (2021): 1–42.

3. See, for example, Benjamin Binder and Jennifer Ronyak, "Singers Speak about Musicology and Performance," in *The Lied at the Crossroads of Performance and Musicology*, ed. Benjamin Binder and Jennifer Ronyak (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024), 188–99.

not hold, as I was instead drawn in more closely to what a sudden change of voice might offer the immediate dramaturgical situation. The second half of this claim, however, makes a good starting point for addressing the experience of listening, at least purely in audio form, to the songs now in Müller's order, undergirded at times, if not other times, by the switch in the person singing. For reference, I place the two orderings side by side in the following chart (see example 1); songs which remain in the same place in both orderings are set in boldface in both columns (very few retain their position).

<b>1. Gute Nacht</b>	<b>1. Gute Nacht</b>
<b>2. Die Wetterfahne</b>	<b>2. Die Wetterfahne</b>
<b>3. Gefrorene Tränen</b>	<b>3. Gefrorene Tränen</b>
<b>4. Erstarrung</b>	<b>4. Erstarrung</b>
<b>5. Der Lindenbaum</b>	<b>5. Der Lindenbaum</b>
<b>6. Wasserflut</b>	6. Die Post
<b>7. Auf dem Flusse</b>	7. Wasserflut
<b>8. Rückblick</b>	8. Auf dem Flusse
<b>9. Irrlicht</b>	9. Rückblick
<b>10. Rast</b>	10. Der Greise Kopf
<b>11. Frühlingstraum</b>	11. Die Krähe
<b>12. Einsamkeit</b>	12. Letzte Hoffnung
<b>13. Die Post</b>	13. Im Dorfe
<b>14. Der greise Kopf</b>	14. Der stürmische Morgen
<b>15. Die Krähe</b>	15. Täuschung
<b>16. Letzte Hoffnung</b>	16. Der Wegweiser
<b>17. Im Dorfe</b>	17. Das Wirtshaus
<b>18. Der stürmische Morgen</b>	18. Irrlicht
<b>19. Täuschung</b>	19. Rast
<b>20. Der Wegweiser</b>	20. Die Nebensonnen
<b>21. Das Wirtshaus</b>	21. Frühlingstraum
<b>22. Mut!</b>	22. Einsamkeit
<b>23. Die Nebensonnen</b>	23. Mut!
<b>24. Der Leiermann</b>	<b>24. Der Leiermann</b>

Example 1. *Winterreise*, comparison of Schubert's and Müller's orderings.

In the performance on this CD in Müller's order, the ordering changes that result in the first twelve songs performed in this new sequence do not have such a major effect on the

sense of a specific trajectory in the cycle. It is worth noting here that even in Schubert's order, there is a strong and changing mix of moments of potential hope or relief and greater despair—even as the glimmers of hope are normally dashed already in the space of the individual songs in which they occur. A different but similar mix occurs by returning to Müller's ordering. In Müller's sequence, "Die Post" appears already as song six, perhaps offering a lighter glimpse a bit earlier; on the other hand, "Frühlingstraum" now no longer appears in this half, and instead "die Krähe" and "Letzte Hoffnung" darken the picture significantly.

Louveau's claim has more traction in the second twelve songs as performed in Müller's order on the CD. Hearing this performance against a backdrop of not just familiarity with Schubert's order, but also a long interpretive tradition of finding an inevitable trajectory in it, this different ordering offers a less decisive march forward to the final song. While musicological interpreters have approached the second twelve songs in various ways, there is generally consensus that the sequence from nos. 20 through 24 offers a tight-knit journey past clearly hoped-for death and the final inability to reach it. In a recent monograph-length, music-theoretical analysis of the cycle, for example, Lauri Suurpää calls these stages "Choosing Death," "Death Eludes the Wanderer," and "Reflecting on the Inability to Find Death."<sup>4</sup> The outburst in Schubert's no. 22, "Mut," perhaps leaves more room for the interpretation of its placement open, but in this and other common interpretations no. 20, "Der Wegweiser," is taken to be the decisive step starting this dark, final trajectory. In Müller's ordering, in contrast, "Der Wegweiser" now comes already as no. 16, and Schubert's other final-trajectory songs, especially "Das Wirtshaus" and "Die Nebensonnen," which normally progress very swiftly to the final "Der Leiermann," are now more spread out with songs of much more emotional variety in between, including "Irrlicht," and especially, "Frühlingstraum." Müller's last three poems are "Einsamkeit," "Mut," and then "Der Leiermann" (the same in both orderings). Though in this case "Einsamkeit" is itself a dark picture of solitude, it is not nearly the gesture of giving up that is to be found in "Die Nebensonnen," which is in this place no. 22 in Schubert's sequence. Louveau is right to note that performing the songs in this way creates a greater concluding kaleidoscope of emotional views on suffering in solitude, death, and the inability to reach death than in the clearer final trajectory of Schubert's order. Whether this aesthetic effect is desirable is a more difficult question. In the spirit of nineteenth-century pick-and-choose performances of *Winterreise*, it is surely a welcome performative freedom. However, in the end this is not

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4. Lauri Suurpää, *Death in Winterreise: Musico-Poetic Associations in Schubert's Song Cycle* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), vii (table of contents).

really a free selection, or even a smaller set of songs interspersed with, say, additional poetry, music, or arts, as in some more radical recent performance experiments with the cycle.<sup>5</sup> Instead, it is a methodical approach to presenting the full cycle rather intact, exchanging one kind of *Werktreue* fidelity (Schubert's score) for another (Müller's final cycle). The assignment of the songs to each singer according to which Schubert book they appear also adds an interpretive strictness to the gesture. Given the adherence to the rule that underlies it, the march at the end of the cycle through Müller's less dramatically decisive trajectory did not so much lead me to hear this as an artistic escape from Schubert's determinism, but instead to miss it.

At times, the change from the mezzo-soprano to the baritone adds another layer of interest to the change in dramatic trajectory that occurs by reordering the cycle. This is especially the case in moments when one singer has had a longer sequence of songs to themselves, and then both the mood of the next song and its singer change together. For example, because the first five songs, through "Der Lindenbaum," remain in their original order from Schubert's book one, the mezzo-soprano sings them in a straight sequence. As "Die Post" is inserted as a surprise no. 6, and offers fleeting glimpses of sprightly hope compared to the last stanza of "Der Lindenbaum"; the baritone also surprisingly interrupts the song sequence at the same time, highlighting the dramaturgical change from Schubert's original ordering. Similarly, the insertion in the second half of the performance of "Irrlicht," after the failure to find rest at "Das Wirtshaus," surprising in its change from Schubert's version, is also highlighted by a shift from the baritone performance back to a mezzo-soprano entrance. Because following Müller's ordering also involves that greater mix of songs from Schubert's part one and two in the final numbers of this cycle performance, the last songs—already no longer taking Schubert's more determined path—are also broken up quite a lot between shifts from singer to singer.

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5. In recent decades, *Winterreise* has been fodder for ongoing performance experiments. These include performances involving more than one singer (including partially staged performances); at least one professionally filmed performance with full scenic production design; live performances with dance (including the involvement of the singer in choreography); a performance of choral arrangements of the songs interspersed with spoken poetry and jazz numbers; a performance that replaces the piano part with the hurdy-gurdy described in the final song; and new compositions which incorporate the original songs' material. For scholarly treatments of a few of these examples as well as others, see Benjamin Binder, "Performance and Reception," in *The Cambridge Companion to Winterreise*, eds. Marjorie W. Hirsch and Lisa Feurzeig (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 227–41; and Ronyak, "Locating the Wanderer's Solitude in Choral and Non-Solo Performances of *Winterreise*," in *The Lied at the Crossroads*, 126–46.

Unfortunately, the two singers are not so evenly matched. Mezzo-soprano Bunel sings throughout with a beautiful tone, great flexibility of phrasing, timbral contrasts, clear diction, and a convincing command of the expressive content of the songs as well as the latitude one might profitably take with them. In contrast, baritone Lanièce, working with a less full, warm, or supple instrument, does not compensate well with enough expressive contrasts or even strong diction to bring across many of his songs masterfully in comparison with Bunel. Perhaps to be praised more than either singer is the pianist Louveau, who brings novel and sometimes unexpected new colors and articulations to many of the piano passages, in part because he is performing on a Bechstein piano from the nineteenth century. While, as Louveau remarks in the program booklet, the piano is not one from Schubert's own time, it does bring with it what might arguably be called the "grain," after Roland Barthes, offering more of a sense of an instrumental "body" and thus a strong new presence to the cycle that is not necessarily always heard on performances on standard modern pianos.

While not always convincing as a CD-recording of the differently ordered cycle in itself, this recording documents an interesting moment in modern performers' ever-ongoing engagement with this canonical work. The project's creative work with the historical genesis of the cycle and the variability of its attendant performance practices over time, as well as its use of a historical piano, presents a thoughtful view of today's ongoing efforts to take inspiration for new performance experiments from learning about the flexible and changing aspects of composing and performing the nineteenth-century Lied repertoire in the century from which it came. As such, this CD is worth exploring, even as it cannot communicate the fullness of the live performance project.

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