

PASSION

From the exhilarating giddiness of a first encounter, to the rose-tinted stage of identifying the unexpected poetry of a coffee plunger, to the aftermath where you avoid changing the broken light bulb in the bathroom for three weeks because.... why bother? Passion: the high swings and the gravel-scraping lows.

First encounters begin this program with Zilcher's *Frühgang* and two Lieder written by Strauss while in his late twenties: *Begegnung* and *Rote Rosen*. Here we have the froth and giddiness of youthful love... the rose-colored recollection of first dates, the delicious first expansion of the heart. Fate has lent these characters a helping hand by borrowing Nature's paintbrush; feelings too big for indoors are reflected in awe-inspiring natural surroundings.

Schumann follows with the opening two songs of his famous cycle *Frauenliebe und -leben*. I must confess that I have avoided this cycle like the plague up until now, as my not-so-inner feminist riles up against the poetry, which sets the man on such a noble, unattainable pedestal. I have broken my own rule to include these two particular songs in order to describe that breaking down of the 'I' that occurs when you begin to fall in love with someone, the idolization of the beloved, that willingness to knock down all boundaries, and the extreme vulnerability that occurs as a result. What I could not see before in this cycle was Schumann's genius of transforming these vulnerable, uncomfortable feelings into music of such incredible beauty.

In a romantic gesture that has echoed throughout the centuries, Gustav Mahler tucked the pages of the song *Liebst du um Schönheit* into a score of *Siegfried* as a surprise gift for his young wife, Alma, in the summer of 1902. In another love story some forty years before, Richard Wagner orchestrated the song *Träume* in time for it to be performed beneath Mathilde Wesendonck's window on her birthday. Perhaps we have all giggled up our twenty-first century sleeves at the unabashed wearing of hearts on the corresponding sleeves of the Late Romantics, but there is an honesty and transparency to this method of communication that we could learn from in our rapid text message correspondence of today. The most honest voice of our program is heard in *Allerseelen* – heartbreaking in its gentle plea for someone who has died to come back.

Our second-half volleys between what our Disney-choked imaginations *expect* of love and the reality of love (which is no less magical in those brief breath-catching moments, but also deals with the day-to-day worries and doubts that occupy every close relationship: WHY does he not wash that last spoon in the sink? WHY does she insist on leaving her dirty laundry at the foot of the bed?). We begin with Cupid galloping across the skies on the winged horse Pegasus, a shout-out to the fairytale, to the fantastical, and to the cheer-it-from-the-rooftops beginnings of passion.

We move from Cupid depicted to Cupid's handiwork with songs of more "ordinary" love. Robert Burns writes of a wayward Scottish lass who warns her lover not to call to the house unless the "back yet be a-jee" (back gate is left open), not to look at her in public, and to "court nae another" – in short, an eighteenth-century version of a modern-day commitment-phob, complete with Scottish brogue. A century later, another lass is captured by the pen of John Jacob Niles, who dreams of her own unassuming farmer lad, while being courted by an array of other lovers.

An ordinary moment becomes extraordinary in *Silent Noon* when a couple finds magic in the fleeting moments of a summer's day and, again, Nature seems to reflect the patterns of the heart. In *Twilight Fancies* we find the typical fairytale of a princess in her bower, but without the happy ending we have come to expect of these stories; the boy is not the cure-all for this character and she calls out, "What is it I long for? What is it I long for?"

So, we flip the coin and find it has not worked out. Your heart has been broken... Now what? You heal. Slowly, one day at a time, you learn to look up again. The last three songs of this program describe that process: the first coherent thought of moving on in *Heart, we will forget him*, the moment when you realize you will become whole again in *Sure on this shining night*, and the mellowing of memory into something that will warm and not harm you in *Now sleeps the crimson petal*.

*"Look at the stars! Look, look up at the skies!
O look at all the fire-folk sitting in the air!
The bright boroughs, the circle-citadels there!"*
- Gerard Manley Hopkins