

San Francisco Chronicle

November 20, 2013

Shai Wosner: Recital devoted to Schubert's music

By Joshua Kosman

The Israeli-born pianist Shai Wosner embraces a wide range of the keyboard repertoire, from Bach through Ligeti and beyond. But recently one composer above all - Franz Schubert - has engaged his attention.



Wosner's Berkeley recital on Sunday is devoted to music by and about Schubert. In addition to two of the composer's piano sonatas and his "Three Piano Pieces," the program also includes, "Idyll and Abyss (Six Schubert Reminiscences)," a 2009 piece by the German composer Jörg Widmann. Wosner, 37, recently talked about Schubert by phone from his home in New York.

Q: What's the genesis of this intense concentration on Schubert and his music?

A: To be honest, there's not necessarily a five-year master plan. It's just a strong connection I feel to his music in the last few years that has made me want to do all or nearly all-Schubert programs. Part of the reason too is that some of the pieces work best with other Schubert pieces, rather than on a mixed program.

Q: What drew you to Schubert's music in the first place?

A: It was indirect at first. I grew up a Mahler fanatic - I still am - and it was only later that I realized how big a connection there is between them. I got to Schubert's music through Mahler, rather than the other way around.

Q: What are some of the connections you see between them?

A: One very specific example is this obsession with marches they both have. There's an inexorable drive, a relentless tread that seems to have an element of fate about it.

Also, there is this whole ambivalence between major and minor, which they can base entire movements on. And that goes with the tension between the seemingly naive and the tragic that coexists all the time in their biggest pieces.

Q: How does Widmann's work relate to the Schubert pieces?

A: This piece is actually a prologue to Schubert's B-Flat Sonata, in a rather specific way. It doesn't quote too much, but to me it feels like a subtle visit to the psyche of Schubert's music. It's not parody, and not pastiche; it's more like a behind-the-scenes view of Schubert's music.

Q: What do you consider the essence of Schubert's music?

A: The unique thing about Schubert compared to his contemporaries or his predecessors is his concept of time. Even though on the surface things are constructed like Beethoven, Schubert's music has a kind of spaciousness.

And because everything today seems to become shorter and shorter and faster and faster - which has good points, I don't mean to seem like a Luddite - but his sense of time and his patience with things make a nice contrast to the world of 140 characters. I think it's a good thing to have Schubert in your life as a balance.

If you go

Shai Wosner: 3 p.m. Sunday. \$32. Hertz Hall, UC Berkeley. (510) 642-9988.
www.calperformances.org.

<http://www.sfgate.com/music/article/Shai-Wosner-Recital-devoted-to-Schubert-s-music-4996883.php>