

An intimate voice done violence by the piano

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From Monday's Globe and Mail

July 21, 2008 at 3:12 AM EDT

Elora Festival

Die schone Mullerin

Colin Ainsworth, tenor

James Bourne, piano

In Elora on Saturday

Franz Schubert's song cycle *Die schöne Müllerin* - The Pretty Millermaid - is one of the pinnacles of the vocal repertoire. Its 20 songs are not merely gorgeous music, though they are certainly that.

But they also follow a dramatic course from a rustic young miller's first innocent love, through his shocked and bitter disillusionment when he loses that love, and on to the tragedy of his death.

The singer and pianist must perform each song beautifully on the exacting level of its music. They also must follow the dramatic course of the cycle so naturally and so convincingly that the listener is compelled to share the young man's joys and ardours, his failure, anguish and despair, and his final resigned serenity as the waters of the brook close over his head.

The enormously gifted young Canadian tenor Colin Ainsworth, with James Bourne at the piano, took on the steep challenge of this work Saturday afternoon at the Elora Festival, and one would like to say the team met the challenge in every respect.

Ainsworth's voice, a finely focused lyric tenor firm and steady throughout its range, is ideally suited to the work. His enunciation of Wilhelm Muller's text was a model of clarity. Apart from an unarticulated ornament on the word "Reim" in the 11th song (*Mein!*), his vocal technique encompassed every note of the score with ease.

But the gifts of the singer alone cannot determine the outcome in the performance of such a work.

Here, the crucial importance of the piano collaboration comes into the picture. I knew, from the first notes of the introduction to the first song, that James Bourne's piano would be a problem unless he refined it and adjusted its decibel level instantly. Alas, he did not. I thought of the question that the most famous of piano collaborators, Gerald Moore, asked in the title of one of his books of memoirs: Am I too loud? If Bourne were to ask that question, the reply would have to be "Yes, you are definitely too loud, and too often loud." His barely bridled volume had the unhappy effect of pushing Ainsworth to the top of his voice more often than was necessary or desirable. This might have been effective in a coliseum, though I doubt it. In the lovely, resonantly intimate space of Elora's St. John's Church, it was a kind of violence.

This was a pity, because Ainsworth has within himself and well within his capabilities an exceptionally lyrical and moving *Die schöne Müllerin*. This much was evident in the quiet passages of the great sixth song, *Der Neugierige* (Curiosity), the haunting 16th song, *Die liebe Farbe* (The Favourite Colour), and the heartbroken 18th, *Trockne Blumen* (Withered Flowers). It was clear also in the touching dialogue between the miller and the brook in the 19th song.

But the crude clangour of the opening song, *Das Wandern* (Wandering), the boisterous banging in the third, *Halt!*, the unmitigated row of the 11th, *Mein!* (Mine), and the unsorted rumpus of the 14th and 15th, *Der Jäger* (The Hunter) and *Eifersucht und stolz* (Jealousy and pride) made noisy cartoons of those intensely but individually emotional utterances.

And the ham-handedness of Bourne's approach to the subtle, pivotal 12th song, *Pause*, with its music's spooky foreshadowing of what lies ahead, threw out of countenance not only of that song itself but the next two as well.

One cannot entirely absolve Ainsworth from what went wrong here. It takes two to fail to tango. He has more and deeper thinking to do about this complex, marvellous cycle of songs by the foremost master of the genre. Nevertheless, he remains on the side of the angels.

But Bourne has much more to answer for and much more to do to get the piano parts thoughtfully and fluently in train, and technically under control. One can only hope he will do it.

Special to The Globe and Mail

