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Winterreise review – Keenlyside and Middleton close the Leeds Lieder Festival in style

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Schubert's song cycle brings the house down in Leeds.



Joseph Middleton & Simon Keenlyside (Photo: Light Attitude)

A sizeable audience listened in total silence to this towering performance of Schubert's great work, despite the extreme heat – then burst into thumping, stamping applause – and rightly so. Such utter silence – not a cough, not a gulp of water, not a sneak peak at the 'phone – betokens total involvement of all concerned. The recital was preceded by an appeal for funding to replace the loss of the festival's Arts Council England grant, featuring most of the big names in the world of Song, and the quality of this performance gave ample evidence of just how worthwhile this festival has proven to be.

The music begins and ends with the piano, and so shall we. From the steady, 'gehende bewegung' (walking movement) of the opening bars, we knew that we were in the hands of one of the most technically adept and musically sensitive of accompanists, [Joseph Middleton](#). Gerald Moore would feel proud.



Simon Keenlyside (Photo: Light Attitude)

[Simon Keenlyside](#)'s voice has taken on a gravelly quality, not unexpected given his 63 years, and not inappropriate for this set of songs. It was clear from the first song that this was to be a raw, uncompromising interpretation, taking in every form of despair and regret. 'Die Wetterfahne' was full of rage, 'Thr Kind ist eine reiche Braut' hurled into the air like a curse, and in 'Gefrorene Tränen' the tears seemed to drop from each note on the piano and every syllable of the voice.

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In 'Erstarrung' the anguish of the poet was brought out in 'Wo find' ich eine Blüte / Wo find' ich grünes Gras', supported by the piano's hesitant questioning. 'Der Lindenbaum' showed just how gripping it can be when a pianist and singer seem to be as one, the aching sweetness of 'Ich schnitt in seine Rinde / So manches liebe Wort' giving way to the firm resolution of 'Ich wendelte mich nicht'.

Keenlyside's complete identification with the protagonist was vividly shown in 'Frühlingstraum', with the heartbreaking question 'Wer malte die Blätter da?' echoed by Middleton's tremulously delicate playing, contrasting with the furious rage of the moment when morning comes. This was as fine an example of Lieder singing and playing as you could wish for.



Joseph Middleton (Photo: Leeds Lieder)

'Der Wegweiser' can sometimes feel a touch sentimental, but not on this platform – 'Habe ja doch nichts begangen / Dass ich Menschen sollte scheu'n' was remarkable for its naked candour. The final three songs sealed the interpretation as one of rage giving way to resignation, the grim defiance of 'Mut' undermined by the visionary dread of 'Die Nebensonnen' where Middleton's playing touched heights of lyric grace.

One of today's leading Song interpreters in partnership with one of the best accompanists around today, in an intimate setting with every audience member rapt with attention. What more could you ask for? Perhaps the acknowledgement by the powers that be, that this kind of event and those which cluster around it in terms of participation and outreach, is worthy of appropriate support.

• A crowdfunding site has been set up to help ensure the future of Leeds Lieder. Please help if you can [here](#).