

DOPPELGÄNGER

Last night I had the good fortune of attending the last of five performances of *Doppelgänger* that was performed for a rapt audience at the Park Avenue Armory in Manhattan. A review in the *New York Times* described the production as “part performance and part installation art... [that] beautifully explores the hunger for life and its beauty and the idea that death is not a sudden moment but a last journey.” My own summary is only one word: “exquisite.”

Franz Schubert's *Der Doppelgänger* combined lieder for human voice and piano accompaniment and provided a poignant musical setting for poems by Heinrich Heine and Ludwig Rellstab. Musicologists argued about whether Schubert intended them to be performed together and, if so, in what order; nonetheless, a common theme is hopeless desire and/or lost love. A doppelgänger is an exact double of a living person, literally translated from German as a "double walker." In Heine's poem (see below) a man imagines the house where his beloved used to live, and in terror sees himself as he once was standing there. It is a portent of death and, in this production the man is a gravely wounded soldier during World War I and the scene is a military hospital.

These songs were written in 1828, the year of Schubert's death at age 31, ascribed by some as a result of syphilis and/or its treatment with mercury. Six months after the composer died, fourteen songs were published together as *Schwanengesang* (Swan Song); according to mythology, swans are mute during life and sing only once, with unearthly beauty, just before they die. In fact, this title was not Schubert's, but was appended by his publisher in recognition of the fact they were among his final utterances as a composer.

In German folklore, *Der Doppelgänger*, usually translated as “The Wraith”, meant an apparition of a living person, the appearance of which was regarded as a portent of that person's imminent death. In Heine's poem, which ends this stark production, the man walks late at night past a house once occupied by his loved-one. She has long ago left, but seeing the house raises painful memories. In the darkened house he sees a ghostly apparition, which he recognizes as himself; a wraith whose presence implies imminent release from pain through death.



Franz Schubert (1797 - 1828)

*Still is the night, the streets are at rest;
In this house lived my sweetheart.
She has long since left the town,
But the house still stands on the same place.*

*There too stands a man staring up
And wringing his hands in anguish,
I shudder when I see his face —
The moon shows me my own form.*

*You ghostly double, you pale companion!
Why do you ape the pain of my love?
Which tormented me on this very place
So many a night in days long gone?*

This world premier performance of Schubert's songs featured the brilliant German tenor Jonas Kaufmann and pianist Helmut Deutsch and was directed by Claus Guth. What especially distinguished this production was that the intimate musical synthesis was performed within the vast space of the Armory's cavernous drill hall.



Kaufmann is a soldier who lies dying in a field hospital. He is one of about two dozen injured soldiers being attended by a fleet of six nurses; the rest of the soldiers writhe and sometimes rise and dance around; dramatic lighting and video effects and sounds of war intensify the mood. Deutsch and the piano are placed dead center among more than 60 hospital beds that stretch across the immense hall's floor. Kaufmann's soldier spends the last hour of his life revisiting memories and, because this comes as he stares into the ominous void that awaits, the emotional impact is stunning.

The following review well captured this unique theatrical production:

“Supported by world-class design and musicality, and with a strong appreciation of peculiarities of the venue, *Doppelgänger* is awesome experimental theater on a grand scale. Classical music purists may bristle at the overlaying of narrative on a song cycle that wasn’t written for this purpose, but Guth thrillingly reveals the theatrical potential in Schubert’s songs and the universal emotions they express. There’s really nothing like it in New York right now.” ([Zachary Stewart Off-Broadway](#) Sept.25, 2023)

Too bad, there were only five performances — especially because it will be difficult to duplicate in another setting than the Park Avenue Armory.



Too gorgeous to overlook, Schubert’s famous *Standchen* (Serenade) which is beautifully sung by Kaufmann in this performance, is played here on You Tube by pianist Khatia Buniatishvili — also too gorgeous to overlook.



Michael Nevins
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