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Schubert Song Cycles by Max van Egmond and Penelope Crawford



Franz Schubert: *Die Schöne Müllerin*, Op. 25, D 795, and *Winterreise*, D. 911; Max van Egmond, baritone, Penelope Crawford, fortepiano (Graf, Vienna, 1835); [Musica Omnia](#) MO 0107 and MO 0108, ©2006, 55:40 and 68:36, \$11.99 each.

These two song cycles are perhaps the most famous and frequently performed in the entire lieder repertoire and have perhaps also been recorded by more artists than any others. When Max van Egmond recorded these CDs in 2001, he was 65 years old, more than twice Schubert's age when he composed the cycles and Müller's when he wrote the poems. When Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau recorded with Gerald Moore in 1962 what has been considered by many to be the benchmark version of *Winterreise*, now re-issued in EMI's "Great Artists of the Century" series (5627872, ©2004, 71:23), he was 36, also older than both Schubert and Müller when they died. Fischer-Dieskau's interpretation was viewed at the time as too tragic, overly restrained and devoid of emotion. Egmond's is even more so. Yet might he perhaps actually be closer to what Schubert envisioned?

When he began composing both cycles, Schubert knew that he had syphilis and would ultimately die, perhaps relatively soon. Such a state of knowledge generally brings one a wisdom beyond that which the arithmetical accumulation of one's years might otherwise generate. It gives one a different perspective on virtually everything, and that wisdom and perspective are apparent in both works, even if they are especially noticeable in *Winterreise*. The subject matter of *Die Schöne Müllerin* is several centuries old, but was usually treated in a more lighthearted manner, as a youthful frolic or exploit. The seriousness here probably cannot be solely ascribed to its being a product of the Romantic Age.

Egmond's age can occasionally be detected in his voice, and this takes one somewhat by surprise on 1st listening. It is fine for *Winterreise*. It works a bit less well for *Die Schöne Müllerin*, but yet is not really detrimental for this cycle; it simply offers a different and unaccustomed perspective. Another recording of it that I enjoy is by Thierry Félix with Paul Badura-Skoda playing an 1825 Graf (Arcana A 57, © 1997 [recorded 1996], 57:00). Egmond in no way suffers by comparison; the piano, however, is weaker, perhaps a function of the recording circumstances. Egmond's interpretation is a mature, more seasoned reading rather than the more youthful, vigorous, occasionally somewhat lusty zeal that is perhaps more frequently heard. While *Winterreise* is entirely from the 1st person point of view, this cycle features frequent changes between the 1st and 3rd person perspectives. Egmond handles the shifts extremely well and avoids gratuitous over-emoting in the former.

The booklets show much care in their preparation and are models to be emulated. The front covers feature appropriate works of art, that of *Winterreise* a contemporary one, and the back covers, a photo of the performers. Their contents begin with the tracks and timings, followed by the texts with translations by Susan L. Youens, rather than making these the sort of Appendix that most art song booklets do. These are followed, in *Winterreise*, by a note about the fortepiano, and in both by individualized notes from Egmond. Next come solid scholarly essays by Youens that give informative background of as much as is known about the genesis of the poetry and the composition of the music in the context of Wilhelm Müller's (1794-1827) and Schubert's (1797-1828) lives, as well as illuminating insights into the works. Finally there are the bios of the artists and recording credits. The *Winterreise* booklet also contains photos of the composer and bass Johann Michael Vogl who premièred the work in 1827 at age 59. The essay in this booklet, however, contains a few curious typos, has an occasional dropped word, and the large initial capitals are lacking on the 1st words of all the paragraphs after the 1st five, unfortunate blemishes in these otherwise fine productions.

The particular pleasures of these recordings are the warm resonant sound of the piano, so wonderfully handled by Crawford, likely very close to the sound that the composer heard and had in mind, and the mature, seasoned interpretation of Egmond, a welcome change from the sometimes overly dramatic and excessively enthusiastic renditions of younger singers wishing to validate their abilities in order to establish their careers. They should be required listening and benchmarks for future interpreters because of their depth of understanding as well as their artistry. Very highly recommended.

Marvin J. Ward

[< Prev](#)

[Next >](#)

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