

## **Two Beautiful Millers and a Stream...**

Saturday, July 14, 8:00pm

The Western Front

by Colin MacDonald

Tragic love has long been an inspiration for artists, and witnessing failed love continues to be a contemporary passion with the proliferation of soap operas and reality TV dating shows. Turn the page back to the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century and we find a similar voyeurism, dressed up and given the title of Romantic Poetry, but with the same heartache that we all recognize. Mezzo-soprano Barbara Ebbeson and pianist Alison Nishihara brought this romantic spirit to the present in a performance of the complete song cycle *Die Schöne Müllerin* op.25, by Franz Schubert.

Written just five years before his death, this work confirmed the young Viennese composer's gift for the art song. The text tells the story of a young miller whose love for a beautiful maid goes unrequited, and ends in his apparent, yet peaceful, suicide. This theme had parallels in Schubert's own struggle for professional recognition, as he died virtually unknown.

He is best known for his melodic writing, but real genius lay in the emotional content of the piano writing, which set the tone for each new declamation of text. Nishihara's sensitive playing was a fine complement to Ebbeson's voice, and a testament to their long working relationship, as each musician supported the other in subtle shifts of tempo and phrasing. It was somewhat disconcerting to hear a female voice sing a text that was meant for, and more characteristically sung by, a man's voice, and her coquettish staging gave a feeling of pre-adolescence to the work, but it gave some support to the young lad's starry-

eyed vision of love. Ebbeson's German diction should be commended for the ease with which she executed a language so densely filled with harsh consonants, somehow making it all flow.

The second half of the program opened with songs by veteran Canadian composer Murray Adaskin. *Autumn Song* had the unusual pairing of voice and bassoon (played by Olivia Martin), but its angular counterpoint seemed to separate rather than unite the two melodies. The pianist returned to the duo for *Prairie Lily*, *The Shepherd*, and *Epitaph*, which were more nostalgic settings of pastoral texts with a sound that was, strangely, recognizably Canadian.

Ebbeson showed her true strength and character in a selection of cabaret songs by Kurt Weill and Rodney Sharman. Also in the realm of tragic love, these texts had a gritty, sexy attitude, which she played to full effect. Weill's melodic language in *Der Abschiedsbrief (The Farewell Letter)*, and *Surabaya Johnny* was playfully expressive, and sounded like it was much more fun to sing than Schubert. Sharman's *Tobacco Road* spoke of a love affair with cigarettes, but the text could have easily referred to a human ex-lover, with the play of fixation and addiction characterized by a snaking melody and subtly chromatic harmonies.

The Western Front's intimacy and Ebbeson's casual rapport recalled Schubert's own salon parties, and it's fitting that these works can be heard in a similar context almost two hundred years later.