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Revista Portuguesa de Musicologia
Portuguese Journal of Musicology

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<https://doi.org/10.57885/rpmns.564>

**RPM**Revista Portuguesa de Musicologia
Portuguese Journal of Musicology

nova série | new series

11/2 (2024), pp. 303-308 | ISSN 2183-8410

doi: 10.57885/rpmns.564 | <http://rpm-ns.pt>

Review: *Robert Schumann: Lieder op. 40, op. 36, and op. 35*, André Baleiro, Baritone; David Santos, Piano (CD Codax Music, 2023)

Laurenz Lütteken

This publication is exceptional in nearly every respect. It brings together three song collections from Robert Schumann's 'first' song year, 1840. Two of them are shorter and less canonical than the more prominent Kerner Lieder, op. 35. This combination is as remarkable as the arrangement is. It does not follow the chronology of the opus numbers, but the order of the compositional process. The five songs based on texts by Hans Christian Andersen, translated by Adelbert von Chamisso (and supplemented by an own poem of the translator), were published as op. 40, but composed in July 1840. The following month, Schumann set six poems by the Danzig-born painter Robert Reinick to music, which were then printed as op. 36. And finally, in November, followed the large series of 12 poems by Justinus Kerner, which were then published with the lowest opus number (35). Only op. 36 was originally specified for a particular voice (for soprano or tenor), but Schumann later 'softened' this specification.

André Baleiro, who has made a name for himself as a singer of the Lied, takes an unusual approach in his interpretation of Schumann (which is clearly committed to the current philological state of knowledge), supported in this attitude by his piano partner David Santos. With his baritone voice, which is flawless in intonation, colour and diction and seems to know no differences in register, he realises the songs with a surprising lyrical distance that is new in its consistency. He thus approaches the songs from the 'outside', as it were; he does not stand within them, but rather in front of them, like an observer. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the songs based on Robert Reinick, i.e. on the texts of a painter, receive specific attention in the process.

Baleiro's lyrical flow, here ideally supported by Santos, is restrained, marked by a peculiar melancholic distance. Even where dialogue comes directly into play, for example in *Muttertraum* (op. 40/2), the terrible raven at the end sounds more like a surreal alienation, like

a dream from afar. This distancing attitude is linked to another remarkable peculiarity. Baleiro consistently chooses fast tempos, thus distinguishing himself from almost all interpreters, even those of recent and contemporary history, including Christian Gerhaher, with whom he otherwise has much in common. And yet this circumstance does not lead to a real acceleration, but on the contrary. In this way, the songs become melancholic, almost ethereal miniatures, sounding as if they come from another world. One has to go back very far in the history of interpretation, for example to the tenor Ernst Haefliger, to find at least indirect models for this largely isolated approach.

The interplay between singer and pianist often unfolds like a *sfumato*, carried by subtly staged small shifts in the otherwise very precise metre, except for Schumann's own explicit tempo instructions. Even in the rhythmically floating shifts of *Märzveilchen* (op. 40, 1), this results in an idiosyncratically changing (yet precisely structured) soundscape. This becomes even clearer in *Soldat* (op. 40, 3), where the military march becomes an almost Mahlerian surreal fiction. Rarely can one experience such a deliberately alienating contrast between the forte of the piano and the piano of the singer when the singing voice enters.

This melancholic blurring is a very distinctive feature of Schumann's specific romanticism before the great crisis of the year 1848. Baleiro and Santos explore this idiosyncratic configuration, which is quite isolated in Europe, in a truly fascinating way. It is perhaps no coincidence that the *Kerner Lieder* form the centre of the disc, yet they are placed in a special context thanks to the clever programming. Directly at the beginning *Sturmnacht* (op. 35, 1) appears less like a drama than a fantastical dream, carried by a vibrantly realised metrical blurring. This extends to the very last songs, to the echo-like 'Wer machte Dich so krank' (op. 35, 11), but above all to *Alte Laute* (op. 35, 12). The two bars of the unison, straight-measured prelude are used, as it were, to lend the subsequent six-eight time a surreal blurring. In Baleiro's sonorous yet restrained tone, the sounds of the bird and the hope for angelic singing thus become a strangely unreal counterpart.

There is no question that this outstanding release is a milestone in the history of interpretation, not only because Baleiro and Santos are perfectly in tune with each other, but also because they avoid all the obvious pitfalls that these songs always entail with intelligent precision and superior prudence. It is an interpretation of Schumann that is, in a sense, drawn from the unreal, from the irrational—and one naturally wonders how the two would then deal with the changes in Schumann's late work.

Precisely because the concept and interpretation are remarkable, the lack of care that the label has shown in releasing this album is all the more regrettable. Even the cover, featuring a photograph of a plant from 1860, seems more like a random association—but with what, exactly? A brief introduction by Bernardo Mariano, which only hints at a few moments in the album's creation, is virtually the single additional content. Everything else one would expect from such an ambitious release is missing. Not only are there printing errors in the track list,

but the time specifications are also missing—for whatever reason. Given the result, there is no doubt that the two performers worked according to the latest philological standards. There is no reference to the edition used, nor to any decisions made in cases of conflict. There is no indication of the date of recording, the recording method, the location or the instrument used. The texts (in the version used) are missing, not to mention translations.

These are not trivial matters. It is more than annoying when such an outstanding recording is published so carelessly. It is common knowledge that CD production and the CD market are in a very difficult situation today. However, the answer should not lie in an indifference—quite the contrary. Now more than ever, we should insist on the importance of physical recordings and how they are released, because they undoubtedly have a different and more stable lifespan. So, in the end, there is nothing left to do but simply embrace this extraordinary interpretation of Schumann—and hope that Baleiro and Santos will soon continue their astonishing and fascinating exploration of the cosmos of Schumann's Lieder.

Laurenz Lütteken, born in 1964, has been chair of musicology at the University of Zurich since 2001. Prior to that, he taught at the universities of Heidelberg, Münster, Erlangen and Marburg. He is the editor in chief of the encyclopedia *MGG Online* (since 2016) and has edited the *Wagner Handbook* (2nd ed., 2021). Most recent publications: *Die Zauberflöte. Mozart und der Abschied von der Aufklärung* (Munich, Beck 2024) (english translation forthcoming, Chicago 2027); *Lesarten und Lebenswelten. Essays zur Musik* (Kassel - Heidelberg, Bärenreiter - Metzler 2024); *Aufgehobene Revolution. Annäherungen an Richard Wagners 'Ring'* (Kassel - Berlin, Bärenreiter - Metzler 2026).

