

Not just a voice

A lieder singer of distinction debuted last week at Brussels' La Monnaie/De Munt. Patrice Lieberman tells why Christian Gerhaher stands out

German baritone Christian Gerhaher is one of the finest artists in today's wide field of high-calibre lieder singers. What is so special about him? Not so much his voice, beautiful as it is, but the way he uses it. His sparkling debut last weekend at Brussels' La Monnaie/De Munt showed off his marvellous gifts and excellent schooling: for the audience it was a singing lesson of the first order, from beginning to end.

Gerhaher began the carefully composed programme with Beethoven's cycle *An die ferne Geliebte*. In it, he displayed a light baritone with a free and easy top range, superb phrasing and, above all, the crucial talent for real lieder singers – that of telling a story in song. Both here and in a selection of Mozart songs, he managed perfectly to convey the composers' efforts to escape the expressive limitations of a musical genre that in their day was still confined to the drawing room.

A stronger contrast than the one which followed can hardly be imagined. Pavel Haas's *Four Songs on Chinese Texts* (in Czech) were written in 1944 in the Theresienstadt concentration camp (the gifted Jewish Czech composer was to die in Auschwitz that same year). The songs are extroverted, dramatic and intense, with a demanding and very independent piano part that was handled effortlessly by the remarkable Gerold Huber.

Devoted entirely to songs by Mahler, the second part of the recital started with a selection from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*. Singer and pianist caught the folk-song spirit of these delightful pieces and performed them with simplicity and delicacy.

Then came the tragic *Kindertotenlieder* cycle. Even more than the usual orchestral version, the piano accompaniment of those desolate songs, in which a father mourns the death of his young children, makes every dissonance tell. Gerhaher's admirable sobriety vividly communicated the pain expressed in the music, so much so that the mood-breaking applause that followed the last song came as a shock.

Singer and pianist rewarded the enthusiastic audience with an unexpected Mahler encore: *Urlicht*. This song (also heard in Mahler's *Symphony No 2*) is generally treated as female territory, but Gerhaher's and Huber's performance of it was simply mesmerising.



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Christian Gerhaher: lieder singer who has it all