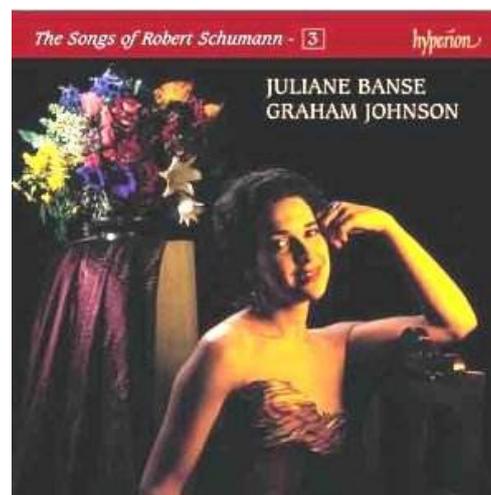


**Robert SCHUMANN**

**The Songs of Robert Schumann - Volume 3:**

Loreley Op. 53 no. 2  
 Jasminenstrauch Op. 27 no 4  
 Sag' an, o Lieber Vogel mein Op. 27 no. 4  
 Die Kartenlegerin Op. 31 no 2  
 Blondels Lied Op. 53 no. 1  
 Frauenliebe und Leben, song cycle Op. 42  
 Geisternahe Op. 77 no. 3  
 Die Soldatenbraut Op. 64 no 1  
 Schneeglocken Op. 96 no.4  
 Stiller Vorwulf Op. 77 no. 4  
 Gesungen Op. 96 no 4  
 Himmel und Erde Op. 96 no.5  
 Sieben Lieder von Elisabeth Kulman Op. 104 plus the spoken Nachschrift  
 Gedichteder Konigin Maria Stuart Op. 135  
 Juliane Banse with Graham Johnson  
 Rec. 1999 DDD  
 HYPERION CDJ 33103 (73 56)



Any recital by Juliane Banse is more than welcome. This disc is truly superb, an absolute treasure, a very precious gem. The Sunday Times said that Banse is a born lieder singer and that this disc is a must-buy for lieder lovers. That is inadequate. Banse is 'the' lieder singer and listening to this exquisite disc should convert those who are not especially fond of song recitals.

I also have to commend Hyperion for the magnificent 88 page booklet written by Graham Johnson that accompanies this disc. It teems with detail, and includes the texts in German and English, detailed information and even helpful comments on the piano parts. I do not agree with some of the things he says, however. There is a brief biography of both artists. Graham Johnson is an excellent accompanist and his contribution must not be diminished or overlooked. I am aware how difficult a skill and discipline this is. No wonder he is in demand and has worked with the very best of soloists from Brigitte Fassbaender to Anthony Rolfe Johnson.

Schumann's songs are far, far better than those of Schubert for many reasons most of which are obvious. Schumann's songs are not superficial and have integral piano parts not the vamping of a few chords which often pervades those of Schubert. Some of Schubert's piano parts are dire and simply awful. Schumann's vocal lines are unrestricted and usually include a greater range not only of notes but of feeling. A Schubert song can be pretty but a Schumann song is an experience to be thought about. Having said that Banse performs Schubert songs as well as the material allows.

Banse's intonation is flawless. She does not exaggerate anything she does and the change in her voice registers of chest, throat and head are so beautifully controlled that you do not notice it. That takes a class singer of the highest order to achieve. She is not a show-off with screeching tessitura and growling low notes which some singers indulge in to show off and project how clever they are or how difficult a song is. A good singer makes everything sound effortless. The whole range of Banse's voice is both consistent and mercurial.

The song Der Ring from Frauenliebe und Leben is remarkable. The tempo is perfect, the style exactly right, the tone simply perfect and the effect creates a very wonderful and moving performance that speaks to the soul and the heart .

Consider the song Schneeglocken Opus 96 no. 2 and admire the glowing voice, the drama without affectation and the thrilling sound. It is unbeatable!

These are just two examples!

The opening song Loreley is under-rated. Notice how both the pianist and singer emerge from the depths as it were and the magnificent vocal control. Nostalgia without wallowing. Jasminenstrauch is a glorious song with filigree piano writing. Sag an, o lieber Vogel mein is a narrative song sung with a compelling and beautiful simplicity. It is a song that hovers between a scene of domestic bliss and a lullaby. My, how well it is sung and those rich top notes which still send shivers down my spine! Der Kartenlegerin, the Fortune teller, is absolute fun and the unexaggerated comic style reveals Bause's understanding of this song. It is almost operatic in style. The composer has captured the femininity of the song which is about a sixteen year old who is something of a coquette. Note the importance of the piano part. It is not just a Schubertian type support. Blondel's Song is also a substantial song in which each of the verses end Suche treu, so findest du which translated is Seek in faith and you shall find. It reveals Schumann's interest in history and the subject of this narrative song is Richard I who was imprisoned in 1192 by Leopold of Austria. The songs of Mary, Queen of Scots follow; another example of Schumann's interest in history. Blondel's song to King Richard is a little long but the variety that Bause brings to this keeps our interest. Note the quality and commitment of Graham Johnson's accompaniment.

Frauenliebe und Leben, Op. 42 dates from 1840 and is, without doubt, the first great song cycle. Seit ich ihn gesehen speaks of the young girl noticing this darling man and saying that since seeing him she is blind to all else. How marvellously Bause captures the shyness of the girl, the blushing face and the butterflies in the stomach. Robert's Clara is here and the work was composed when they were negotiating their first home together. Er, der herrlichste is a compelling and flawless song as the girl wonders at the kind and gentle man on whom she has lavished her devotions. Her love for him is so blissful

Then shall I rejoice and weep,  
Blissful, blissful shall I be,  
Even if my heart should break  
Break, O heart, what does it matter?

Bause captures this perfectly without sentimentality.

The third song, Ich kann's nicht fassen, nicht glauben is strong and confident as the man has said to her, "I am yours forever." Her girlishness is now to blossom in womanhood.

Der Ring is sung in a moving performance that melts the heart of even a hard person. The engagement ring seals the promise to marry. Hugo Wolf said that this song was magical and unsurpassed. One waits for the return of that sumptuous tune in E flat and when it comes the heart is glad. The next song is Helft mir, ihr Schwestern in which the girl asks her sisters to help with her wedding dress. The arpeggio figure in the piano part clearly suggests the trying on and off of many garments. It is so convincing and obvious. All the previous songs has been private and this is the first public one, the public being her sisters. Susser Freund, du Blickest is a song of happiness and joy but in the nineteenth century it would not have been deemed suitable. The girl who is merely a young bride is already pregnant and the husband wonders at her tears for he does not know that he is to be a father. The song is understandably reflective but contains outbursts of emotion; the piano interlude, brief as it is, seems to suggest the presence of the father. The intimacy is still there, an emotion that only Schumann and Wolf have ever successfully captured in their songs. Childbirth is the subject of An meinem Herzen, an meiner Brust and captures the joy of breast feeding, the closeness and joy of a child of one's own. Bause is magnificent and totally convincing. The next

song, Nun hast du mir den ersten Schmerz etan opens with a solemn D minor chord. The dear husband has died. This song is not hysterical of a tearjerker but mourning is present with grief-laden trauma. It is solemn but very touching and the careful listener can hear the tolling bells and the cortege procession.

There is a postlude usually omitted from performances which is spoken sotto voce and Banse does it so well

Dream of my own days  
That now are distant  
Daughter of my daughter  
You sweet child of mine

What this does is portray the loneliness of widowhood and being a single mother and now a grandmother. It is very profound and very moving.

When I buried  
The man I loved  
I cherished my love  
In my faithful heart.  
Though my heart was broken  
My courage stood firm  
And the ashes of old age  
Preserve the sacred glow.

A group of miscellaneous songs follow. Die Soldatenbraut is a strong confident song as the bride-to-be of a soldier wants to tie the knot but warns the soldier that in marriage he will have a cross to bear at home. Banse captures the idea that happy marriage is nothing more than a fantasy!

Schneeglocken, Snowdrop, is a truly lovely song . The power of the song does not accord with the gentle snowdrop and shame on you Graham Johnson for comparing it with Schubert's song Viola and saying that Schubert is superior! I revelled at the purity of the top notes and how a song of infinite variety was held together by skill and insight.

Stiller Vorwurf is a strong song about the pain of the past and how forgiveness may be the only remedy. Gesungen is a fine song which Mr Johnson compares to Schubert's An die Musik ...oh dear, oh dear!

Do you hear the rain lashing the leaves?  
Do you hear branches snap in the sweeping storm?  
Hear too the sweet song of the birds  
Commending themselves to the love of God.

The beauty that Banse brings to Himmel und Erde is remarkable and very profound.

Schumann was fascinated by women and his settings of songs by the Russian born Elisabeth Kulmann and the Maria Stuart songs are further examples. His attempts to elevate the Kulmann songs to a position well above their station and importance was ill-advised and did not serve him well either.

After a spoken introduction in German the first song Mond, meiner Seele Liebling is disarmingly simple. The second song has an opening narration and is a choice little song although slightly affected. The third has a spoken introduction Du nennst mich armes Madchen, a song of pathos with a soaring melody line and fascinating harmonies. Der Zeisig has the same spoken introduction and reflects Schumann's love of nature

It is Maytime, child  
Cast aside your school books  
Come out into the open  
And sing a song with me.

The last three songs in the set are also preceded by an opening narrative and the final item Nachschrift is entirely spoken.

I am not sure that spoken introductions benefit us.

The Maria Stuart songs are to poems written by Mary, Queen of Scots. There are five songs which deal with a quarter of a century in a woman's life. The songs are a farewell to France, a prayer after the birth of her son, a poem to Queen Elisabeth, a farewell to the world and a final prayer. The songs are vastly better than the Kulmann set. The first song in E minor is almost speech and conveys sadness, the second, also in E minor, expresses exhaustion after childbirth and her fear for her future and of her son who was to become a king of England. The song to the Queen is in A minor whereas all the other songs are in E minor, pleading for her to have a change of heart. The penultimate song is one of utter pathos What use is the time still allotted to me?

Banse brings to these exquisite songs a pathos that is unbearably beautiful.

CD of the month? No. CD of the year? No. CD of the decade? That's more like it!

(2018)

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