

Music FT

The Dark Mirror: Zender's Winterreise, Barbican, London — 'Elegant and inventive'

A haunting vision of alienation from Ian Bostridge, who continues to reinvent the role he has sung for 30 years



Ian Bostridge in 'The Dark Mirror: Zender's Winterreise' © Hugo Glendinning

It has been called a psychologist's casebook; an expression of nihilism; a canvas on to which anyone and everyone can project their woes. But above all, Schubert's *Winterreise* is an enigma, a song cycle full of the subtlest inferences that scholars diligently continue to dissect.

So, in one sense, the Barbican's new staged version is problematic. We hear, not the original 1828 score for voice and piano, but its 1993 orchestration by the contemporary German composer Hans Zender. He tends to state where Schubert only insinuates, and at times takes Müller's text too literally — not least in the marching of feet during the work's extended introduction.

So how come the overall result works so well? Partly because Zender's reimagining — combining elements of Mahler, 1930s cabaret music, and crunching dissonance — reminds us just how strikingly modern *Winterreise* was for its time; partly because it strips the protagonist's psyche naked, and shines a floodlight on his inner conflicts (the maniacal mood swings of "Gute Nacht" are particularly disturbing). And partly because Netia Jones's staging enhances Zender's expressionist vision, with the help of her

surreal, monochrome video projections.

Indistinct shadows float across the screen, planting us in a faceless, timeless world. Bleak winter landscapes, which Jones filmed in Finland's Arctic tundra, gradually dissolve into abstract shapes as the wanderer loses his grip on reality. And what of that wanderer? This is where tenor Ian Bostridge steps in, reprising a role he has sung for 30 years.

Costumed like the master of ceremonies from *Cabaret*, he appears both on screen and in the flesh. At one point he stares a younger version of himself in the eye; at another he sprawls lifelessly in the snow. It's elegant, inventive, a haunting take on alienation, and Jones stokes rather than smothers our imagination.

As does Bostridge himself, who brings more stillness and poise to his performance than usual. It pays off particularly in the quiet resignation of "Letzte Hoffnung" and in the glassy calm of "Der Lindenbaum", which, in Zender's interpretation, constantly threatens to shatter. When combined with the accordion-soaked growls of the Britten Sinfonia under Baldur Brönnimann, the effect is rarely less than chilling.

 barbican.org.uk

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