

Bringing Dreams to Newcastle

The Art of Possibility

BEN: One summer I taught a master class at a festival in Newcastle, which was filmed by the BBC. One of the students in the class was a young tenor who had just landed a job at the prestigious La Scala Opera Company in Milan and everything about his demeanor said that we were to take his most recent success very seriously indeed.

He was to sing “Spring Dream” (“Frülingstraum”), from Schubert’s *Die Winterreise*, a song cycle that describes the yearning depressive journey of a jilted lover through the cold days of the soul. In this song, the hero is dreaming of the flowers and meadows of a springtime past when he delighted in the warm embraces of his beloved. The gently lilting music conjures up blissful joy, blissful fulfillment. Suddenly a crow screams from the rooftops—he mistakes the frost patterns on the window for flowers and asks, “Who painted those flowers there—when will they turn to green?” The answer comes to him: “When I have my loved one in my arms again.” But, despite a major key, we know from the dynamic markings and the shape of the phrasing that he will never get her back.

This music is some of the most intimate, soft, subtle, and delicate in the repertoire. It depends for its expression on an understanding of nuances of sadness, vulnerability, and never-ending loss. But when Jeffrey began to sing, there was no trace of melancholy. Out poured a glorious stream of rich, resonant, Italianate sound. Put

Jeffrey, taking himself very seriously. How could I induce him to look past himself in order to become a conduit for the expressive passion of the music?

I began by asking him if he was willing to be coached. “Oh, I love to be coached,” he said breezily, though I doubt he had any idea of what was to follow. For forty-five minutes, I engaged in a battle royal, not with Jeffrey but with his pride, his vocal training, his need to look good, and the years of applause he had received for his extraordinary voice. As each layer was peeled away and he got closer and closer to the raw vulnerability of Schubert’s distraught lover, his voice lost its patina and began to reveal the human soul beneath. His body, too, began to take on a softened and rounded turn. At the final words, “When will I have my lover in my arms again?” Jeffrey’s voice, now almost inaudible, seemed to reach us through some other channel than sound. Nobody stirred—the audience, the players, the BBC crew—all of us were unified in silence. Then, finally, tremendous applause.

I thanked Jeffrey publicly for his willingness to give up his pride, his training, and his vocal accomplishment, and explained that our applause was for the sacrifice he had made to bring us to a place of understanding. “Whenever somebody gives up their pride to reveal a truth to others,” I told him, “we find it incredibly moving; in fact, we are all so moved that even the cameraman is crying.” I hadn’t actually looked in the direction of the camera; I was simply expressing my conviction that no one in the room could be left unmoved.

Later that evening, in the pub, the cameraman came up to me and asked how I had known he had been crying. He confessed that he hadn’t been able to see through his lens for his tears. “When I was sent on this job from London,” he said, shaking his head, “I had no idea that this music shit was about my life.”