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A Renaissance for an Instrument of Melancholy Magic

By CORINNA da FONSECA-WOLLHEIM FEB. 23, 2018

HAMBURG, Germany — At the end of Schubert's great song cycle "Winterreise" stands the Leiermann, a tattered hurdy-gurdy player so repellent that even dogs only growl at him from a distance. And yet there is something about this old beggar, and the endlessly looping tune he cranks out, that fascinates the narrator of this bleak cycle — so much so that the narrator is ready to join him in what promises to be permanent exile, or perhaps death.

Schubert's Leiermann came to life with startling immediacy at a recent performance of "Winterreise" by the vocalist Natasa Mirkovic at the Elbphilharmonie here. Ms. Mirkovic was accompanied not by a pianist, as usual, but by Matthias Loibner, one of a growing tribe of hurdy-gurdy masters who are ushering this thousand-year-old instrument into its latest reincarnation.

Mr. Loibner's arrangement artfully exploits the eerie melancholy of this hand-cranked string instrument, with its metallic snarl and bagpipe-like drone. At times in the performance, he drew out delicate tufted staccato notes; at other moments, he had the juicy thrum of an accordion. Often his sounds were precisely matched to the text. The clap-clap of his fingers on the keys evoked the fluttering crow in one song; a high throaty whistle conjured the will-o'-the-wisp that torments the narrator.

"The moment you pick up a hurdy-gurdy on stage," Mr. Loibner, born in Graz, Austria, in 1969, said in an interview, "people expect you to tell a story."

Hurdy-gurdys now pop up in performances of French Baroque concert music, in medieval re-enactments and folk music gatherings; their drone underpins electronic trance music and experimental jazz. With Ms. Mirkovic, Mr. Loibner is commissioning a "summer journey" song cycle from several Austrian composers that is intended as a counterpart to "Winterreise" ("Winter Journey").

The instrument's recent renaissance is the latest turn in a twisting history. In the Middle Ages, the hurdy-gurdy functioned as an aid to choral teaching in monasteries but soon became known as a rustic accompaniment to village dances. From there, it morphed into the accessory of choice for 18th-century French aristocrats who liked to party dressed as shepherds and poor farmers.

Instrument makers responded by building beautifully ornamented hurdy-gurdys that were often coveted by women; Marie Antoinette is known to have played one. (The French term is “vielle à roue”; the English name imitates the instrument’s sound.) There were virtuosos on the instrument who also wrote sophisticated dance arrangements and concertos for it.

But by the 19th century, hurdy-gurdys were predominantly seen in the hands of beggars. Certain regions, like Savoie in France and the area today belonging to Poland and Ukraine, produced large numbers of itinerant musicians — often blind — who played for a few coins.

Mr. Loibner said that many of the Eastern European hurdy-gurdy players spent the warm months playing on the streets of Austria and Germany and returned home for the winter with what little they had earned. For Schubert’s audiences, then, the pathos of the Leiermann would not have been lost.

“If you saw a hurdy-gurdy player on the ice in winter,” Mr. Loibner said, “you knew he had no reason to go home anymore.”

Blind hurdy-gurdy players producing a ceaseless, penetrating sound also came to be endowed with clairvoyant powers in the popular imagination. Mr. Loibner recalled perhaps the darkest hurdy-gurdy story: Stalin, said to have been fearful of the subversive power of these itinerant

musicians, invited hundreds of them to a festival, where he had them rounded up and sent to their deaths.

Elisabeth Harnik is working to overcome these tragic associations. She is one of the composers commissioned to write songs for Mr. Loibner and Ms. Mirkovic's song cycle. It was a challenge to create "a light mood," she said, "because the instrument has an inherent melancholy." But through experimentation, she had hit upon a technique for producing seagull-like whoops in the instrument's high register that evoked a summer sky.

Advances in instrument-making have helped expand the range of what's possible on a hurdy-gurdy. Robert Green, an American player and Baroque specialist, said in an interview that "the reason it survived so well is that it managed to reinvent itself." Part of its latest reinvention is an electronically enhanced version, which can function like a one-man band or sound like a whole posse of electric guitars. Mr. Loibner often partners with D.J.s and folk ensembles from different traditions, and with a trumpeter and percussionist in Brot und Sterne, a trio known for trancelike jazz improvisations.

But despite his crossover experiments, the iconic figure of Schubert's Leiermann remains at the core of his conception of the instrument. When he was 17, Mr. Loibner and a friend ran away from home, planning to busk their way to India. They only made it as far as Greece, but the experience of being a street musician living hand to mouth stayed with him.

“For me, the closest thing to Schubert’s Leiermann are the groups of punks you sometimes pass on the street,” he said. “They may have a dog, and there’s always one who plays the guitar. And he’s so drunk he plays only one chord over and over — and the instrument is out of tune. But there is this freedom and — for me, for a moment — the longing to cross over and leave behind all the rules of society.”

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