

Friday 19 January 2024

## Made in Switzerland: tenor Daniel Behle & pianist Oliver Schnyder combine musicality & intelligence in their recital for Lucerne's Le Piano Symphonique

Labels: concert review, Switzerland



View of Lucerne - watercolour by Felix Mendelssohn 1847 (Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#))

*Made in Switzerland* - Mendelssohn, Schubert, Schubert/Liszt, Liszt, Wagner, R. Strauss; Daniel Behle, Oliver Schnyder; Le Piano Symphonique at Lukaskirche, Lucerne  
Reviewed 18 January 2024

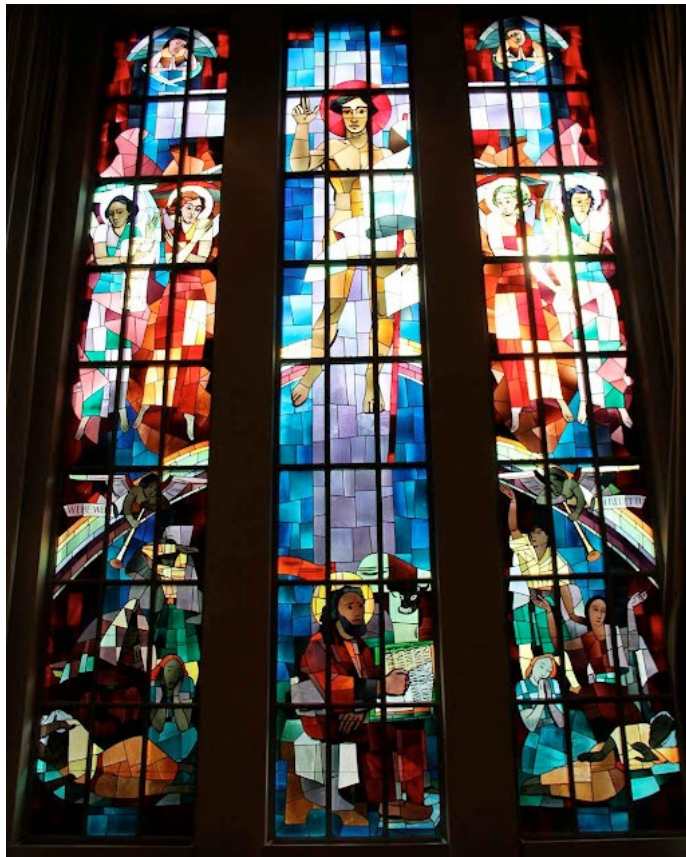
### **A wonderfully imaginative programme centred on music created in Switzerland in finely communicative and musical performances, combining bravura and technical skill with sheer musicality and intelligence**

Le Piano Symphonique's lunchtime concerts in Lucerne largely take place in the Lukaskirche, a fine 1930s church not far from KKL, the festival's evening home. There, in front of the impressive stained glass window of the Last Judgement (by Louis Moilliet), Swiss pianist Oliver Schnyder and German tenor Daniel Behle presented *Made in Switzerland* on 18 January 2024, a programme exploring music by composers who lived and worked in Switzerland. Their programme centred on Liszt's *Années de pèlerinage, Première année: Suisse*, and ended with Richard Strauss, living in Switzerland after World War II and writing his *Four Last Songs*.

But the recital began with Mendelssohn who not only visited Lucerne but painted it in 1847 (see above). Some ten years before this, Mendelssohn was writing his Bach-inspired *Six Preludes and Fugues, Op. 35* and Oliver Schnyder played the first of these, in E Major. The prelude was full of movement and drama with Schnyder making a wonderfully vivid sound. The fugue began in a concentrated fashion with a rather chromatic fugue subject, but Schnyder made the movement build in momentum and drama leading to a vibrant climax, which was followed by Mendelssohn's incorporation of a chorale into the structure.

Around the same time as Mendelssohn was working on his preludes and fugues, Liszt was coming to the end of his period living in Geneva with Marie d'Agoult, and his transcription of Schubert's song cycle *Schwanengesang* dates from this period. Daniel Behle sang Schubert's *Ständchen* from *Schwanengesang* and then Oliver Schnyder played Liszt's transcription, a fascinating sequence.

Behle and Schnyder were finely concentrated in the Schubert, with Behle singing with a superb sense of line. Liszt's transcription began in a fairly straight manner, with Schnyder also conveying a fine sense of line though the transcription seemed marginally less intense than the original song. As the verses progressed, however, Liszt applied gradual changes and decorations to intensify things, subtle but telling.



Last Judgement window by Louis Moilliet in Lukaskirche, Lucerne

Liszt's Swiss sojourn would provide the inspiration for the Swiss first volume of his *Années de pèlerinage*, completed in the period 1848 to 1855. All the works in the volume are inspired in some way by Switzerland, often relating to literature referring to ideas about the country.

*Au lac de Wallenstadt* is inspired by lines from Byron's *Childe Harold*. There seemed to be hints of a folk melody over a running accompaniment creating a short but affecting movement. The rather more substantial *Vallée d'Obermann* refers to a novel of the same name set in Switzerland and involving a hero who is overwhelmed by nature. Schnyder began in dark, concentrated manner with some deeply profound moments. And though textures became more flowing and momentum built, Schnyder ensured that the dark moments never entirely disappeared, though things developed into a real bravura climax before reducing down to a single line which became a wonderfully consoling moment leading to the affirmative ending. Schnyder's way with Liszt was terrific, technically adept he managed to create a vibrant sense of passionate atmosphere whether the brooding melancholy of *Wallenstadt* or the darkening profundity of *Obermann*.

Richard Wagner famously lived near Lucerne during his years of exile following his aborted involvement in politics in 1849. He wrote his *Wesendonck Lieder* here, as well as some of his major operatic works and in an almost ironic nod to this. Daniel Behle and Oliver Schnyder performed Wagner's song *Tout n'est qu'images fugitives* (in fact setting a German text), which dates from the period 1839/40 when he was living in Paris, short of money and writing songs for publication. It hardly sounds like Wagner at all and rather reminded me of a salon piece with Lisztian influences too.

Oliver Schnyder's final excursion through Liszt's Switzerland was *Les cloches de Genève: Nocturne*, again inspired by Byron rather than being a tone picture of the city where Liszt had lived, and the work was all delicate textures around a melody which contained a hint of mystery. Schnyder brought out the central melody with strong tone and singing line, surrounded by a web of delicacy, perhaps the bells Liszt heard were of a lighter sort, and the everything evaporated, the vision disappeared. Terrific.

Richard Strauss stayed in Switzerland after World War II, fleeing the destruction of his beloved Munich and Dresden. Here he wrote his *Four Last Songs*. Whilst we associated Strauss's songs with the female voice, he worked with men too including tenor Julius Patzak who was the only person Strauss recorded *Morgen* with.

We first heard Daniel Behle and Oliver Schnyder in Strauss' *Ständchen*, a lovely reference back to the Schubert/Liszt sequence earlier. Behle was ardent, his tenor voice perhaps more robust than a soprano's with a lovely contrast with Schnyder's piano. And so onto the *Four Last Songs*. *Frühling* began with a sense of dark foreboding, though the storminess was kept in check. The way Behle used his head voice to lighten the texture was fascinating, though sometimes he did not seem quite at ease with Strauss' highly chromatic vocal line. However, Behle brought a superb sense of line to *September* over Schnyder's lovely, detailed piano part. The two gave a finely concentrated performance that ended in a finely hushed manner. There was a quiet intimacy to the beginning of *Beim Schlafengehen*, as if we were starting in the middle of a conversation. During the piano interlude, Schnyder combined a lovely singing line with wonderful intimacy, a mood matched by Behle when he came in for the final stanzas. The colours in Schnyder's piano at the beginning of *Im Abendrot* were finely conceived, and when Behle joined him there was the sense of the fine-grained vocal line surrounded by a web of sound. A performance that began in a very interior way and was barely there for the words 'Der Tod', followed by Schnyder's tender, mysterious postlude.

There was an encore, Strauss' *Morgen*. Little to do with Switzerland but a wonderful song, superbly sung.

This was a beautifully satisfying recital combining musicality with intelligence. Schnyder deftly moved from vibrant Lisztian drama to tender accompanist whilst Behle's voice, combining as it does a lyric line with an underlying sense of power, is ideal to bring off the Strauss *Four Last Songs*.