



# Room for Interpretation

Mastersinger  
**Christian Gerhaher**  
mines the lied  
repertoire for gold.



► **THERE'S A REASON CRITICS HAVE CALLED** Christian Gerhaher the most moving singer in the world. With a burnished-copper timbre, a native son's easy diction and a prismatic range of vocal colors and dynamics, the forty-seven-year-old German baritone delivers performances of Mahler, Schubert and Schumann songs that make the greatest lieder and arias sound as if they had been written expressly for his voice.

This month, U.S. audiences can hear Gerhaher at work when the baritone and his longtime collaborator, pianist Gerold Huber, tour an all-Mahler program to venues in Washington, D.C., New Haven, Portland, San Francisco and New York. It's a rare visit to the U.S. by one of the most acclaimed singers

of our era—an event not to be missed on an increasingly anemic recital scene.

Speaking by phone from Dresden toward the end of a summer tour with the Mahler Jugendorchester, Gerhaher sounds a bit like a patient from Freud's couch as he ponders the mental contortions that allow

successful forays into staged opera. "After my medical studies, I realized that going to an opera house would not be a wrong move," he says of his two-year stint in the ensemble of Würzburg's Mainfranken Theater. "I had to learn things which I needed, in my own eyes and ears, for a career as a lieder singer, because

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him to keep familiar repertoire sounding fresh. "It is kind of a process of making yourself artificially nervous—or you also can call it a kind of institutionalized crisis," he says. "Every night, I reconsider the possibilities of interpretation, of translation, of a semantic understanding into a certain sound. This is why, apart from relaxing the voice, a performer needs so much time to be able to back away from well-known experiences, and to build them up new every day. This is sometimes a torture, but there's no other way for me."

Though music has been a lifelong passion, Gerhaher initially studied philosophy and medicine, with plans to pursue a career as a psychiatrist; he didn't begin singing professionally until after he had completed his medical studies in Munich and finished a yearlong hospital internship. Turned off by what he perceived as medicine's inability to consider alternate truths, he corrected course. "Music was always the most important thing in my life," he says. But after medicine, music provided an experience that "was a combination of sensuality and spirituality—it was something with big content, like a Goethe song, but it was still physical."

The song repertory may have been Gerhaher's inspiration to pursue a career in music, but he has made frequent and suc-

cessful forays into staged opera. "After my medical studies, I realized that going to an opera house would not be a wrong move," he says of his two-year stint in the ensemble of Würzburg's Mainfranken Theater. "I had to learn things which I needed, in my own eyes and ears, for a career as a lieder singer, because

only projecting words in a nice way is not enough for the lifetime of a singer." In 2007, Gerhaher made his role debut as Wolfram in Frankfurt performances of *Tannhäuser*, and he calls the chance to sing *Wozzeck* last year in Zurich "one of the most beautiful experiences in my life. Together with some Mozart operas, with *Pelleas* and maybe with Monteverdi's *Orfeo*, it is one of the perfect operas." Next month, he sings Posa at the Bavarian State Opera; Boccanegra and Germont are within his sights for future seasons.

Unsurprisingly, Gerhaher idolized Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and even took part in a master class with the older baritone early in his career. Yet he finds fault in the late singer's belief that opera and lieder should be approached with the same voice. "However much I adore and admire him, I can't say I think this is a good sentence. The need to project your voice over an orchestra, into an opera house, makes it very often necessary to sing in the mask. That technique reduces your interpretive possibilities in lieder," he says. "It's my strong opinion that technique is secondary to the vision of sound. For every word in every song, and every moment of a performance, a singer has to produce an individual sound."

Perhaps the only constant in Gerhaher's artistic life has been

his twenty-eight-year collaboration with Huber. The baritone is quick to point out that much of his interpretive freedom begins through their work together. "We are, in a biological sense, kind of symbiotic," he says. "Our collaboration starts at a very different point from those in which strangers work together. We start with no vertical problems—we don't have to rehearse bringing the notes under each other. We can concentrate on different things—on colors, on dynamics and on text. We've rehearsed millions of hours in our life, but now we don't have to rehearse as much anymore. We can just get on to the very important points very quickly." ■

As *Wozzeck* in Zurich, 2015, opposite page; as Wolfram at Covent Garden, 2016, below

