

Tuesday, April 22, 1997

## Schubert party bit Off Centre

Music series celebrates composer's 200th birthday

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MUSIC CRITIC

Before 1997 reaches its close, Toronto will have witnessed more Franz Schubert birthday concerts than Franz Schubert experienced birthdays.

But of all the many 200 candle celebrations mounted locally in his honor, it is doubtful many will come closer to capturing the musical atmosphere the composer himself encountered in the salons of his native Vienna than the Schubertiad presented by the Off Centre Music Series on Sunday afternoon at the Arts And Letters Club.

Schubertiad is the name the composer's own friends gave the essentially domestic sort of gathering at which they performed his music and it is difficult to replicate such domesticity in a formal concert hall, as even CBC Radio and the Aldeburgh Connection must have realized through their admirable attempts at the Glenn Gould Studio earlier this season.

In the intimacy of the Arts And Let-

ters Club's baronially-beamed main hall, on the other hand, with its stage flower-garnished, candle-lit and furnished Biedermeier-style, it was reasonably easy to suspend domestic disbelief — especially since the consumption of Viennese pastries accompanied the music-making.

The music-making began not with Schubert but with a performance of the *F Major Romance* of Schubert's idol, Ludwig van Beethoven, played as an aperitif by a recent Canadian Music Competitions prize winner, violinist Andrew Wei, with Off-Centre co-artistic director Inna Perkis at the piano.

Schubert himself was represented by 10 of his most popular songs sung by the debuting American baritone Douglas Webster, with Perkis again providing a sensitive presence at the piano, and the great *B-flat Major Trio*, Op. 99, featuring Off Centre's other piano-playing artistic director, Boris Zrankin, together with two prominent string players from the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, violinist Atis Bankas and cellist Mihai Tetel.

A recent prize winner in the Concert Artist Guild International Competition and a newcomer to Toronto, Webster possessed an effective voice for *Lieder*, not so rich in tone as to pour chocolate sauce over the words yet flexible

enough to color and point them to dramatic advantage. Although he chose to sing primarily cheerful songs, he demonstrated that he could also summon the greater depths of feeling needed to interpret the likes of "Nacht und Träume" and "Du bist die Ruhe."

His instrumental colleagues exhibited a similar rapport with the music of the *B-flat Major Trio*. If not the last word in Viennese elegance, their playing had plenty of spirit and a clear sense of commitment.

To enhance the salon atmosphere of its concerts, Off Centre typically surrounds the music-making with introductory remarks and readings and on this occasion teacher-lecturer Joe Ringhofer set the historical scene, with actress Jennifer Doyle reading from Schubert's diary.

While the result was a different and refreshingly off-beat kind of concert experience, some of Doyle's additional contributions, recruiting the audience's participation in performing sound poetry and peddling satire, threatened to turn the afternoon into a variety show.

A birthday party may justifiably include party turns. But when the honoree happens to be Franz Schubert, who wants to put obstacles in the way of getting right to the music?