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Normally, a song recital is about music and poetry. With baritone Matthias Goerne, it became a whole-body experience at Koerner Hall on Tuesday night. In the company of fellow German, pianist Andreas Haefliger, the singer gave one of those rare performances that propelled 19th century Lieder into a whole new realm.

For this recital organized by the Toronto Summer Music Festival, Goerne wrapped an unfailingly musical artistic craft and a rich, full voice around Romantic poetry set to music by Robert Schumann in 1840 and Johannes Brahms in 1864, using every note, every phrase – and every silence – toward the singular aim of conveying love, longing and loss in the most directly meaningful way possible.

The dozen poems set by Schumann became a sort of mini opera. At one point, while singing about walking under the trees in a wood, Goerne grabbed on to the lid of the concert grand piano, hugging it as if it was his faraway love.

It might sound strange to imagine a classical singer being so demonstrative, alone on the stage with his accompanist, but this German wonder had allowed the song to become him, and himself to become the song. Even without the full texts and translations supplied with the program, it was always clear exactly what each song was trying to convey.

Haefliger, a highly respected solo pianist, made for a sensitive as well as frustrating accompanist. He and Goerne stayed in lock-step throughout the recital, but while the baritone never wavered from a focus on clarity, Haefliger's accompaniments often sounded a bit muddled, their edges blurred by a too-heavy foot on the sustaining pedal.

After intermission, Haefliger refocused the enthusiastic audience's energy with three intimate Intermezzi by a 60-year-old Brahms. Any audience might seem too much of an intrusion into this introspective musical world, and the pieces themselves pose many interpretive challenges for the pianist, so they're not heard in concert all that often.

Haefliger gave a very personal interpretation, which you could call quirky, if not downright self-indulgent. He played the first of the pieces so slowly that its delicate musings stretched into infinity. The other two had their musical ideas come in and out of focus randomly, awash in a soup of sustaining pedal. It was a relief to have Goerne re-emerge to sing a group of nine Op. 32 Lieder by Brahms, turning our attention again to his masterful musical storytelling. Recitals this fine don't come around very often, which makes each one all the more valuable.