

# The Australian

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## QSO marches into modernism with unshackled take on Schubert

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- **A Winter Journey**

David Hobson and the Queensland Symphony Orchestra. Brisbane Powerhouse Theatre. July 16.

### **ART song is rarely heard in concerts.**

It was heartening to be able to hear the Queensland Symphony Orchestra's production of Hans Zender's controversial Composed Interpretation of Schubert's Wintereisse. Scored for small orchestra spiced with three wind machines, harmonicas, accordion, electronics and guitar (expertly played by Karin Schaupp), the unusual instrumentation signalled the QSO had broken the shackles of traditional performance.

Wilhelm Muller's poems about the existential torment of a spurned lover who hikes through a terrain of crunching ice, moonlit shadows and frozen raindrops is a satisfying vehicle.

Tenor David Hobson sat with the audience until his first entry and several instrumentalists played as they walked towards an atmospherically lit stage. Repositioning of players was frequent to provide surround-sound and echo Muller's words: "Love loves to wander." Lighting by Richard Wenn added depth to the imagery.

All good so far, except that, for logistical reasons, surtitles were not provided. These are crucial for the audience's maximum appreciation of how the musical elements highlight the German text.

Yet there were stunning moments such as the chilling reverberation deployed for Hobson's voice in Die Post (The Mail Coach) and the percussive fluttering and knocking of the wanderer's screaming heart as he farewells his lover in Gute Nacht.

For singers, the Wintereisse is a Herculean challenge. The prolonged excursion into angst makes it taxing to deliver. Rather than become mired in an incarnation of the protagonist's despair, Hobson projected admirably as a persuasive storyteller. His singing was intense, smooth and mercurial, if a little light on in the lower register.

Steering a committed QSO through this challenging score with aplomb, conductor Hamish McKeich shaped splintered passages to conjure shards of ice and freezing land. The composer turns Schubert's epic work inside out, expanding introductions and juxtaposing his own imaginings, yet retaining Schubert's lyricism.

There was a buzz of approval for this provocative presentation, even with the grumbles that it was too long. The performance deserves to be heard again but with surtitles and all instrumentalists acquitting their walks through the space with dramatic conviction.