

# GRAMOPHONE

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Review by Edward Greenfield

Rarely do you hear, even in the rarefied world of French melodie and German Lieder, a baritone who sings with such subtlety in shading of dynamic and tone as the Dutch baritone Henk Neven. Last year I welcomed his Onyx disc of Lieder by Loewe and Schumann and this latest disc extends my admiration even further in totally exquisite singing.

The theme of this collection is the sea, though Neven extends the idea to cover such waterways as the river Danube in Schubert's 'Auf der Donau'. The idea works as a well-planned concert programme, with Debussy and Faure in the first half and Schubert in the second. The three Debussy songs to words by Verlaine are wonderfully evocative in their response to the words describing scenes of nature, starting with 'La mer est plus belle' with surging piano accompaniment supporting a vocal line which ranges over the most subtle range of *pianissimos*, where Neven's voice is headily beautiful.

So it is with the Faure items. *Poeme d'un jour* features three brief songs, ending with the vigorous 'Adieu'. *L'horizon chimérique* covers a wider range of expression in four songs, some of them vigorous ('La mer est infinie'), some deeply reflective ('Diane, Selene'). Four further songs include a cradle song ('Les berceaux') and a lament for the lost beloved ('La chanson du pecheur'). Neven covers all these with the most seductive and responsive singing.

Fine as Neven's French group is, the Schubert songs have an even more powerful impact, as one might expect from eight superb songs starting with the rousing "Der Schiffer", about a ship's captain. Neven may not quite match the bite of the young Gerard Souzay in a long-deleted mono version on Decca, but in his way he is just as incisive in bringing out the word-meaning, with sharply attacked consonants – aptly when in German Lieder consonants are so dominant, so different from songs in French where vowels predominate.

The Schubert group, after such memorable songs as 'Meeres Stille' and 'Gondelfahrer', culminates in the most powerful song of all, 'Gruppe as

dem Tartarus', about the 'angered ocean'. In its vigour and urgency it makes a most apt conclusion. In all the songs Hans Eijsackers is the most sensitive partner, matching Neven in responsiveness. Full texts are provided in French, German and English, though in miniscule print. Altogether a most memorable song record.