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by Keith Tittermary April 14 <http://www.broadwayworld.com/washington-dc/article/BWW-Reviews-OLD-WICKED-SONGS-Soars-at-1stStage-in-Tysons-20150414#>



Sadness and joy is a recurring motif in music. In Jan Marans' provocative play, *Old Wicked Songs*, it is a motif that is played out both figuratively and musically. In Marans' play Viennese music professor Josef Mashkan points out that only those who have suffered can truly emote beautiful music. Countries that have seen centuries of war and oppression can express music more passionately than those that haven't (which, he claims is why there are no true great British, American, or Japanese composers).

Here the story revolves around a young American piano prodigy and his passionate professor. Usually when these student / teacher relationships are played out, it is usually the story of the tough teacher expecting too much of the young pupil (see *Whiplash* as a great example of that). However, in this play, the tables are turned and the seemingly "past his prime" teacher is being arrogantly treated by the young know-it-all. The two are seemingly at odds over life, politics, religion, and music. But when Stephen, the student, has an eye-opening trip to the Dachau concentration camp, he returns a changed person, and the student discovers more about his teacher than he ever realized.

At 1stStage in Tysons, director [Michael Chamberlin](#) has put together a dynamic duo in the roles of pupil and teacher. As the young American pupil, Aaron Bliden brings fierce arrogance to the young American, plagued by young musician burn out, who resorts to obsessive-compulsive rituals before he can play. As the professor, Philip Hosford is exceptional as the old mentor who is trying to use music as a way to forget the past.

Together, Hosford and Bliden play off each other intrinsically, keeping a cautious distance between them yet drawing closer as their relationship evolves. Hosford, the older and wiser of the two is reminiscent of [Arthur Rubinstein](#), both in his subtle look and his fierce musical skills. Bliden, on the other hand, is a bit Glenn Gould, without his eccentricities.

Old Wicked Songs uses music as the impetus that drives the action and these two actors masterfully play (and at times sing) through [Robert Schumann's](#) song cycle *Dichterliebe*. The cycle which forms the

through-line is a series of [Heinrich Heine](#) poems set to music about sadness and joy, and these two fine musicians convey those emotions effortlessly and exquisitely.

Director Chamberlin does a beautiful job creating the environment and tightening the traditional proscenium style into a three sided playing area that makes the audience feel cramped inside the tiny studio, and it beautifully adds to the sadness, which is painted with joy by set designer Kathryn Kaweck's contrasting set of crisp white paper and dirty cardboard. Sound designer [Kenny Neal](#) gives a beautiful train sound scape prior to the show and at times keep the ambient mood light with music. The one drawback to seeing the show at a matinee, however, is having Neal's sound design interrupted by the pounding beat of the Jazzercise studio next door.

1stStage Tysons is producing a remarkable performance. Between the fine show and the accompanying recital, it really shows how music is stronger than words and that music can express sorrowful sadness, yet in a instance can liven you up with infinite joy.

Old Wicked Songs plays through May 3, 2015 at [1stStage in Tysons](#) - 1524 Spring Hill Road, in McLean, VA, 22102.

Box Office: (703) 854-1856 or [online](#).

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