

Christopher's Classics 2019 – 14 April 2019 at The Piano, Christchurch

Julien Van Mellaerts – Baritone

James Baillieu – Piano

Lieder recitals have become all too rare in Christchurch, so this opportunity to hear such accomplished performers in the genre was one to relish. For that, thanks are due once again to Christopher Marshall, and for much else in this year's Christopher's Classics series.

The opening bracket of five Schubert songs included some very familiar examples by this greatest master of song-writing, along with a couple of less familiar pieces. *Seligkeit*, one of the catchiest and simplest of Schubert's songs immediately established the qualities of performance that proved to be the foundation of the whole recital. Baritone Julien Van Mellaerts demonstrated a detailed understanding of the text with every word receiving specific expressive attention and colour; nothing was generalised or bland. And that attention to expressive detail was equally evident in the piano part as played by James Baillieu. *Seligkeit* is, on paper, a simple forty-bar verse song, but, just as the singer varied the expression of the text, so too the pianist underlined the expressive potential of the music; sometimes highlighting one or another part of the texture in order to support the musical story-telling – here a simple lilt in the predominant rhythmic motif to express joy; there, in verse 2, a subtle emphasis in the left hand as if to draw attention to the dancing reference in the text.

This same attention to text and textural detail remained evident throughout the recital. In the same composer's big *Prometheus* ballad, the word painting from both performers left nothing to the imagination.

For me this sort of detailed expression is an essential ingredient of any musical performance. Sometimes such overt expressiveness is criticised for being too operatic, but personally I don't see why there should be a difference. Some of the greatest lieder singers take the expression a step further, delving into the intellectual potential of the poetry's meaning, but Van Mellaerts and Baillieu tended to keep their delivery more on the direct story-telling level.

Schuman's great *Dichterliebe* cycle also featured a similarly detailed approach. Individual songs emerged as finely crafted gems and, again, one of the simplest and well-known, *Ich Grolle Nicht*, had a freshness and distinction that resulted from the musicians' personal exploration of its mood, its contrasts and its context.

But *Dichterliebe* is a thirty-minute cycle of sixteen songs and by about half-way through I began to lose a sense of the direction, or shape of the whole. So, ultimately, despite the many fine qualities of the performance, the work's journey into hopelessness and despair failed to move us as ideally it should.

The second half of the programme was generally lighter in content with songs that require less deeply expressive involvement. Perhaps because of this I became more aware of the vocal qualities of the singer. Van Mellaerts' lower register sometimes lacked a certain 'singing' quality compared to his upper middle register. This was emphasised, in the group that opened the second part of the recital, by composer Gareth Farr's rather inconsistent approach to tessitura, with some songs set more in the lower part of the voice and one in particular, *Huia*, very much in the higher part. This also conveyed the uncomfortable feeling that the composer had not fully engaged with the strengths of the singer for whom he'd been commissioned to write these four songs. The poems used for Farr's *Ornithological Anecdotes*, had also been specially commissioned from Bill Manhire, but apart from an element of mild humour and some engaging onomatopoeic moments, the texts themselves emerged in performance as rather slight. Gareth Farr's response to the humour and sound-imagery of the poems was rather superficially reflected in the piano part with many missed opportunities in the vocal setting.

The somewhat lacklustre invention in Farr's new work was made almost cruelly evident by the contrasting genius and harmonic imagination of Benjamin Britten's folksong accompaniments that followed. Britten's reinvention of these traditional English songs has turned them into miniature artistic gems, so much so that, for me, no other arrangements of some of them can ever live up to these versions. And, although the variable vocal qualities of Van Mellaerts' singing remained, here again, both singer and pianist brought endless personal touches to their performances. Just one example will suffice to demonstrate. In *Down by the Sally Gardens*, there's a wonderful moment where Britten harmonises the word "foolish" in both verses with the dominant minor. In the first verse I was rather disappointed that singer and pianist glossed over the moment, but then, in the second verse it became doubly poignant when they really brought the moment home, with the pianist slightly holding back the steady

quaver pulse and the singer lightening his tone to a beautifully expressive head-voice. Julien Van Mellaerts' whistled ending to *The Plough Boy*, was also a delightful touch.

Finally, a selection of seven 'Ballads and Legends' seemed a rather random grouping. David Farquhar's *Lord Randall* opened the group and proved quite a discovery. And the two Sibelius songs that followed were very much the highlights of this assortment of loosely connected pieces. George Gershwin's *The Lorelei* and Cole Porter's *The Tale of the Oyster*, while engagingly (if not totally securely) delivered, seemed a bit out of place following a couple of songs by Robert and Clara Schumann respectively.

As an encore, *Some Enchanted Evening* from Rogers and Hammerstein's *South Pacific* also missed the mark in a programme where the main course had been some of the finest songs of Schubert and Schumann. But, while there remain some concerns with programming and vocal consistency, the care and detailed insights that both performers brought to this recital made it a very worthwhile opportunity to experience the best of their chosen repertoire.