

Christopher's Classics 2022 – Will King (baritone) and David Codd (piano)

The Piano, Christchurch – 1 April 2022

Reviewed by Tony Ryan

Wellington fog, rather than Covid-19, caused a glitch in the opening of the 2022 season of Christopher's Classics, delaying the concert by twenty-four hours until the musicians could travel. The Christopher's Classics series is a real Christchurch treasure and tonight's programme was especially notable for being the 2022 season's annual concert to feature a rising star in honour of Christopher Marshall, the series' founder and driving force.

New Zealand baritone Will King and pianist David Codd presented a recital that was, by any standard, an astonishing achievement overall. The twenty-six-year-old singer regaled us with twenty-seven songs (more if you count Britten's *Songs and Proverbs* separately) with such variety of expression, total affinity with everything on the programme, and entirely from memory!

Francis Poulenc's 1957 song cycle *Le Travail du Peintre*, which embodies responses to the works of seven twentieth century painters, could hardly be described as a gentle warm-up at the start of a recital, but Will King and David Codd came on stage and launched into the first song *Pablo Picasso* with an uplifting vitality that was maintained right to the end of their recital of French and English songs. In this first set, King demonstrated his fluent and easy legato and an ability to communicate the detail of the text rather than the generalised expression that young singers can often rely on. As yet, the voice itself can't be pinned down as being, say, 'dark' or 'rich' or 'light', with different registers changing in tonal quality, partly as a result of the singer's expression, partly because of a still developing technique.

With the lid of the grand piano fully raised (thankfully), David Codd immediately established himself as an equal partner in the duo, fully justifying his self-description as a 'collaborative' pianist, as opposed to 'accompanist'. And, while it's the singer in such a partnership that more easily demands our focus, the musical input of both performers was very evident throughout the evening. Codd's ability to underline and share in King's expressive variety with contrasts of light and shade and colour, made for very engaging and convincing music-making.

Benjamin Britten's *Songs and Proverbs of William Blake* are not for the faint-hearted from both the audience and performers' point-of-view. Written for the great Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau in 1965, few singers have managed to come close to *his* classic recording with the composer at the piano. That such a young singer could carry it off so convincingly as Will King did, is remarkable to say the least. In his spoken introduction to the cycle, King professed it to be his favourite song cycle "of all time", and then went on to demonstrate such a fluid and natural-sounding interpretation that it made me want to hear him do it all over again. His *Tyger* may not have darted quite as furtively through the forest as Fischer-Dieskau's, nor did his *Fly* dance as elusively, or his *Sun-flower* burst so spontaneously into bloom, but he faced the late baritone's challenge with such youthful, almost naïve, self-assurance that the whole cycle came to life in a way that I simply had not expected. I look forward to hearing Will King explore this work again as his artistry matures.

In the Britten, David Codd complemented King's interpretation to the full without quite matching the composer's own improvisatory quality and rhythmic ambiguity; and he also seemed to miss Britten's way of making that final F Major chord sound surprising, beautiful, and even witty.

The second part of the programme comprised, in the singer's words, "lighter" fare, and, while Roger Quilter's early cycle *To Julia* (1905) fell pleasingly enough on the ear with its easy harmonic language and unchallenging expressive style, it failed, unlike the Poulenc and Britten works, to provide anything truly memorable to take away from this recital. King made the most of the six songs' pretty, if ephemeral, melodies, but this music doesn't manage to enhance Robert Herrick's poems to any notable degree.

Ravel's *Two Hebrew Songs* brought a return to something much more original, and Will King projected the eastern melodic and stylistic features idiomatically and effectively, even if a certain sameness of expression was now beginning to creep in as the voice tired a little.

If Gerald Finzi's *Let Us Garlands Bring* delves more deeply into Shakespeare's texts, with engaging harmonic invention and expressive contrasts, than Quilter's settings do into Herrick's, this final group of songs on tonight's programme have an almost drawing-room sophistication and restraint that, for me, doesn't match Shakespeare's more down-to-earth contexts. Even so, Will King and David Codd maintained our engagement with their forthright and

communicative stage presence and we left the concert hall well satisfied, even if it was the Poulenc and Britten works that provided the most memorable takeaway fare.