



The Association of English Singers & Speakers

Honorary Presidents

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www.aofess.org.uk

NEWSLETTER JULY 2010

A NOTE FROM THE CHAIRMAN

AGM and Annual Dinner at the Royal Overseas League - March 21st 2010

On Sunday March 21st, twenty-four members, including Patricia Routledge CBE, an Honorary President, attended the AGM of the Association at the Royal Overseas League. It was heard that membership had increased a little and the total of subscription and honorary members was 180. Funds were healthy and there was no need for an increase in subscriptions. There was a lively discussion about ways of increasing entries to the three AESS competitions and it was decided to hold an open committee meeting in the future to discuss this further. The Chairman's Report, the Report to the Charities Commission from the Trustees and the Accounts can be viewed on the website.

Forty-five Members and their guests attended the Dinner. They were treated to a wonderfully compiled programme of poetry and prose on a culinary theme, superlatively delivered, after what must have been extensive rehearsal, by Marilyn Cutts, Marian Lines and Rosamund Shelley. This set the relaxed and humorous tone for the evening and after an excellent dinner our Guest of Honour, Gabriel Woolf spoke entertainingly on the pitfalls of speaking and lecturing in America and England, both historically and from his own experience

The final of the first Courtney Kenny Award for singers aged 18-23 was held in the Recital Room of Tonbridge School on Sunday March 14th. This means that the three AESS competitions, unique in that they ask for a themed programme of English 'Art' song combined with spoken poetry and prose, now cover an age range of 13-32 and offer the chance for aspiring performers to develop their skills of communication. Thanks are due to the Arts and Facilities Manager, John Marshall, for arranging our use of the school. Stephen Miles co-ordinated the competition and Graham Trew organised the day itself and welcomed the audience and performers.

Courtney Kenny was able to be present to lead the panel and to present the prizes. The other members of the panel were Eileen Price and Marilyn Cutts.

Seven finalists were selected from two preliminary days held in Whitgift School, Croydon and the Leeds College of Music. Both venues donated their buildings for which the AESS is most grateful and thanks for this is due to Paul Wilson, Director of Music at Whitgift and Philip Meaden, Principal of Leeds College.

There were many fine performances of individual songs and spoken items during the afternoon. No-one performer stood out as being a certain winner and much discussion ensued amongst the judges and audience about the relative merits of the programmes.

In general it was felt that diction was still a weakness in many of the performances.

The winner of the first prize of £1000 was Angharad Lyddon, a student of Glenville Hargreaves at the Royal Academy of Music, whose programme was titled 'Hopes and Dreams'. Her spoken poem was considered the most successful of the afternoon and her fine, mature sound was shown to advantage in songs by Bridge, Ireland, Elgar and Quilter. Some of the poetry needed more depth of interpretation vocally and the full tone sometimes affected the diction but her whole performance together with her rapport with her accompanist provided a polished and effective recital. The runner-up was Alicia Gurney, taught by AESS member Margaret Humphrey Clark, who won £500, performing on the theme of 'Sacred and Profane Love'. Her programme was extremely well conceived, if rather long. She spoke well, interestingly and at length about both songs and spoken works. So much speech halted the flow of the words and music at times. However, there was much good singing here and potential for future success. Third, also winning £500 was Ruth Jenkins who studies with Lillian Watson at the Royal Academy of Music. She sang and spoke on the 'Guises of Love'. Ruth's personality shone through in her speaking and singing and she communicated well. The 'operatic' quality of her sound needed to be harnessed for some of the more introspective and intense songs. 'The fields are full' suffered the most, being the quietest song and intonation problems were evident here. The accompanist's prize of £500 went to Rupert Compston who held the audience's attention by creating real atmosphere at the ends of songs as well as adding much colour to extremely difficult works of Finzi and Britten.

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Of the other finalists, Marianne Wright sang with a fine tone but needed to do more to vary the colour of four songs by Cecilia McDowall in what was quite a short programme. Guy Hayward showed off his baritone to advantage but needed to show more personality

in both sung and spoken items facially and vocally. Joshua Baxter came over well to the audience and his programme was sung with an attractive light tone and good diction. More could have been done to colour individual words and the voice is still to develop a unified tone from top to bottom, which it will in time. Rowan Pierce sang with a lovely, clear, focussed tone and excellent diction. She could have done a little more facially and vocally to bring out the humour of some of her pieces and at present the voice does not have colour at the lower end of the range needed in songs such as Walton's 'Rhyme'. However, all the finalists acquitted themselves well and it was felt that those who did not win this year could be successful with another year of development.

Graham Trew

'A CELEBRATION OF ARMSTRONG GIBBS'..... a view from the Third Row Budworth Hall...Ongar February 7th 2010

I was invited to the second of the 'Unsung Heroes' concerts by my dear friend and colleague, Stephen Miles. It was a delightful and very edifying afternoon which combined a chance to catch up with old friends, listen to some well known (and less-well known) English Art Song and poetry readings... plus bringing me into the very welcoming bosom of the AESS.

The venue was the most attractive Budworth Hall in Ongar, Essex which is a Grade 2 listed building and currently under threat of closure due to a decline in bookings...such a shame. Pity it is not closer to Woodford as I would certainly make use of it. Initially, I had hoped to bring all 19 members of my girls' chamber choir, but was told that there would not be sufficient seating...this was clearly a popular event. In the end I brought four guests (this being after the venue was changed to the larger hall at the last minute) which included my daughter Beth and two adult students.

It was good to hear such a variety of voices both in the singing and the speaking and refreshing to hear students and teachers on the same platform with a healthy balance of the sexes. There were also five accompanists who all brought their own special flair. My mature student Olivia has been a fan of Walter de la Mare since childhood; she commented on how refreshing it was to hear ladies of a 'certain age' (like her) enjoying performing in a relaxed setting...it gave her a real boost and she has often said since, how much she learned from these performers about presentation.

I had not seen Michael Pilkington since my days in his English Song Classes at GSM in the 70's but of course had encountered his name as arranger and editor in many song albums – his experience and knowledge is vast and apart from his superb accompanying, he stepped in at the eleventh hour to talk about Armstrong Gibbs.

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I must congratulate Patricia Williams for not only putting together such a fine menu of items and for her impressive playing and for twice following her accompanying with unscripted recitations.

I would have liked to hear more from the Milton Keynes Chorale who made as beautiful sound...well done too for waiting to the end to delight us.

I look forward to more of these concerts – a most pleasant way to spend a Sunday afternoon.

Jane Roberson

THE PATRICIA ROUTLEDGE ENGLISH SONG COMPETITION FINAL 12/05/2010

The Final of the Patricia Routledge English Song Competition was held at the RCM on Wednesday evening, May12th, to an audience of “quality rather than quantity”. There were five singers and pianists, all of whom gave confident, polished performances.

Jennifer France (soprano) opened the evening with “A Love Story” as the title of her programme, and some of the best songs of Bishop, Parry and Quilter. I think all those present would agree that her immediate warmth and generosity was a promising start to a very good evening of vocal talent and meticulous preparation.

Soprano Penelope Manser’s programme of “Innocence and Experience” provided a particularly appealing choice of poetry to the settings of Armstrong Gibbs and Howells, and I was thrilled to be reminded what a very good song is the Hopkins’ setting of “A Melancholy Song”.

Kathryn McAdam (mezzo) chose to sing Britten, Bridges and Barber, with two very attractive traditional songs (Heggie) to finish. Her warm centered sound was ideal in this programme of “Lost Love”.

Christopher Jacklin (tenor) presented his programme with great clarity and authority. On reading the title – “The Deep Well of Time – Meditations on Christianity and Life after Death” – I feared it might be darkly intense, but Christopher’s very honest delivery made it comfortable for me. His singing was beautifully in focus in the baritone qualities and he seemed at home with the poetry. As a young singer he is clearly experiencing varied styles and periods of song, and as a listener I am reminded of the excitement of discovering Purcell and Britten particularly during my early teens.

The final performer, Helen-Jane Howells (soprano) was – for me – the most striking of all. There was an all-round confidence about her presentation of Britten, Dunhill (what a lovely song is ‘The Cloths of Heaven’) and Heggie before a very strong finale in Michael Head’s “The Singer”.

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There was a broad range of styles and humour in the spoken word, and I felt those performances were some of the best I have heard.

All the singers were most sensitively accompanied by Caroline James, Clive Pollard, Jennifer Miles, Hannah Harnest, and Anna Tetsura.

The winners were:

3rd Place: CHRISTOPHER JACKLIN

2nd Place: JENNIFER FRANCE

1st Place: HELEN-JANE HOWELLS

Accompanist: JENNIFER MILES

Betty Roe

Thoughts on speaking in the AESS English Song Competitions

In the last 2 or 3 years the ‘speech’ requirement in the competitors’ programmes has improved tremendously and this was true of the latest competition, the Patricia Routledge Prize, reviewed above. The winner, Helen-Jane Howells, spoke her verse – ‘May’ and ‘The life that I have’ – with refreshing charm and naturalness and projected her words extremely well. However some singers still don’t quite reach the high standard of their songs when speaking their poem/prose, and their clarity of voice and projection, when speaking, is not always adequate. This is understandable in young singers; speaking words in their own right, without the support and inspiration of music can make a singer feel exposed and vulnerable – just as an actor/speaker might feel if required to prepare a song as an adjunct to a poetry speaking competition.

Preparing to speak verse needs time; not simply to learn the words – though this is very important and must not be rushed – but to allow the poem to evolve in the subconscious. It is quite magical how the dynamics and emotional nuances of a poem emerge as you get to know it over time. So time is the first requirement; the next is relaxation and focus when preparing to speak. Once you have got to the ‘heart of the matter’ in your chosen poem you are sure to feel more at ease, able to interpret the poet’s thought and communicate that ‘heart’ to the audience using some of your singing tools – breath control and projection.

I’m sure that singers will say ‘but this is just how we approach a song – what’s new about that’. They’re right, speaking and singing are different mediums for the voice but they use similar pathways to performance. So, always choose a poem for your love of it, not simply because it fits into the theme of your programme; give it time to sink into your subconscious and evolve – and ENJOY.

Marian Lines

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THOUGHTS FROM THE ‘sharp end’ OF THE PIANO

The Tribulations of an Accompanist

In 1954, doing one of my first professional jobs, I was pianist to a variety show at the Princess Pavilion, Falmouth. On Sunday evenings we had visiting singers. One week we had a soprano who had not been heard before by the manager. However, she said she had sung at La Scala, so was accepted. (It must have been the old London Scala theatre, I think!). She was told that the audience would be coming in from 7.30, but that I would be available for a run-through anytime after 7.00. She arrived at 7.45, and was annoyed to find she could not try her songs. She then produced a pile of sheet songs and leafed through them, commenting 'not that one, the piano part is a bit difficult.' (she had never heard me play). She picked one, saying, please stop at the end of the introduction, then we can go on together.

As can be imagined, I was not very pleased by this treatment, and when she picked 'Vissi d'arte' using the sheet copy I made no comment about the introduction. The copy gives only Bb below middle C for introduction, which I duly played, only for her to come in on high G instead of Eb - she was brought down to the right pitch by the manager (a tenor) singing from off stage. After this she announced her encore - 'I know where I'm going' which produced a certain amount of laughter from the audience.

I have told this story to many of my students as an example of what NOT to do. She may have been a very annoying and rather unmusical singer, but I should have given her a full chord with Eb at the top for 'Vissi d'arte', as it was obvious she would need help. She did not ask for a chord, but what I did was unfair on the audience, who had paid good money to hear a concert, not a comedy.

Michael Pilkington

Amblings of an Accompanist

I always wanted to be an actress. Well that's not entirely true. My first ambition was to be a ballet dancer. Faint hope! My parents could not afford ballet lessons and I had the weight and grace of a carthorse with a preponderance of left hooves, so acting it was to be.

Fate had other intentions. My piano teacher sent me, aged ten, to play the piano for the Girls' Life Brigade cadets and I learned to sight-read on the hoof. At primary school I was detailed to play for the choir since I could manage Arne's "When Daisies Pied" quite nicely and at grammar school I soon found myself accompanying grade exams. Meanwhile I lost two leading stage roles, one through illness and the second, the role of

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Lady Sangazure in "The Sorcerer", because the company's pianist walked out and I was the only person available to cover rehearsals. As the understudy had sung all the

rehearsals she took the part. (We are still friends forty five years later!) It seemed someone was trying to tell me something! I applied for music college.

My studies at Guildhall quickly leaned towards accompanying, particularly for singers and I went through college loving playing for the Chamber choir, for singing teachers and for song classes. We could hardly have had better tutors- Walter Grüner for Lieder, Robin Bowman for French song and Michael Pilkington for English song. Perhaps I was foolish to assume that any sort of accompanying would be equally rewarding. I landed a pianist's job at the Royal Ballet School, ironically fulfilling that childhood longing to go to White Lodge, but loathing the work. After a year I resigned and tried to freelance. Things were not going well. I was an indifferent piano teacher and during the fateful year at the ballet school I had lost my singing contacts. I wrote around to singing teachers asking for work as an accompanist. Most letters went unanswered but, always the gentleman, John Carol Case replied to say that he already had a regular accompanist. I was feeling low.

Then came one of those strokes of fate that turns your life around. Daphne broke her leg. Who was Daphne? She was John's accompanist, and two days before he was due to run a week of masterclasses she had slipped in the garden and broken her leg. It was later suggested that I had a wax dummy and was sticking pins into it but this is a malicious fabrication.

I learnt so much in that week. John was a superb teacher and in my opinion unparalleled in giving masterclasses. Every singer went away with something to encourage them and the audience was fascinated and entertained by turns. He was equally helpful in all styles of classical singing from Oratorio to Art song but, of course, he was a master of English song. When a student struggled with the flexibility of Finzi's "To Lizbie Brown" John demonstrated, asking me to accompany his performance and in that one song showed just how a singer can be free to express the lilt and flow of the text. He had worked with Finzi, Vaughan Williams and Britten and was able to interpret their songs so very convincingly.

I still remember other points he made, equally important for both singer and accompanist. He showed how careful positioning leads to better ensemble, how to achieve good balance, how to use the composer's markings to the best effect, and especially how the text inspires the musical content and so is the key to the whole song. Recently in a song recital I heard an accompanist thundering away at a romping speed in the introduction to a song. Had she learnt nothing from its title - "Silent Noon"? Isn't there perhaps a little clue there?

That week of masterclasses made a huge difference to my life. I learned a great deal of repertoire, gained confidence and several of the students asked me to accompany them or give coaching. Thus I began to build up a practice working with singers and this led to

the teaching work I do today. Through John's recommendation I met new singers and with one of them toured South Africa. I also asked John if I might have singing lessons with him and what he taught me has underpinned all my work in teaching, coaching and accompanying singers.

Patricia Williams

BOOKS

From Stephen Miles: AESS members will be intrigued and delighted to learn that Rona Laurie has written a biography, which is available at Amazon.co.uk

Rona Laurie the War Years (paperback)

As she approaches her 93rd birthday, Rona Laurie came under increasing pressure from friends and students to write an account of her war-time experiences, first as a student at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art and then as a young actress in repertory, on tour and finally in the West End during London's blitz in World War 2.

<http://www.amazon.co.uk/Rona-Laurie-War-Years>

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FUTURE EVENTS

Sunday October 17th. 2.00pm : University of Chichester

'The Dring Thing' A celebration of the life and work of Madeleine Dring compiled by Ro Hancock Child. Details: 01243-827706 rosemary.hancockchild@btinternet.com

Sunday November 21st. 2.00pm St John's School, Leatherhead

Final of the 2010 Catherine Lambert Junior Recital Prize.