

Alexei Winter's thoughts on constructing a recital for AESS competitions

Following the 2014 Patricia Routledge English Song Competition, I was asked to write a few words to describe my experiences in the competition. I hope what follows provides a little insight into how I approached the day and the construction of a programme.

English Song has always been the music with which I have felt most comfortable. I had in fact not been singing for long when, in 2012, my teacher suggested I enter for the Patricia Routledge prize. I was studying privately in Bristol while working on a doctorate (in renewable energy, fluid dynamics and control systems, of all things!) and was, at that point, considering whether to dedicate my future to singing or press on with the research and aim for a more conventional career. My experiences with the competition in 2012 played a huge part in swaying me towards the former option.

Having no experience of competition singing at that point, I was slightly at a loss as to where to start. I couldn't find a huge amount of information about how the competition was judged, but it seemed clear to me that a programme with a cohesive integrity would be much better received than one simply made up of a collection of songs loosely united by a theme. There were many hours spent in the library poring over collections of songs. It was a happy time and I was amazed by the depths of the English Song repertoire – it must never be casually thought that the best songs were written only by the names that we are familiar with!

After a while a theme began to emerge: something to do with the night, and in particular the moon. The keystone for the programme was always going to be Finzi's setting of Hardy's anguished *At a lunar eclipse*, and that rather set the tone for other pieces that later joined it. Hardy's text is extraordinary and the tension between the beguilingly peaceful shadow of the earth creeping across the moon, and the knowledge of tumultuous human world that it belies is excruciating. There is a strong first person feel to the poem – it is an ode – and I started to wonder who it was that was speaking these words. After a while, I hit on the idea of weaving a set of pieces together along the lines of a journey through a single night and selected pieces accordingly – the programme was finished. There was no distinction between poem and song in terms of hierarchy in the programme – each component was intended only to progress the narrative. The title of *A Moonlit Night* seemed an obvious choice.

First, Warlock's *Autumn twilight* showed night creeping in across the landscape, then came Manley Hopkins' dreamlike *Moonrise*, and the world was filled with moonlight for Armstrong Gibbs' *Silver*. The implied protagonist wandered through the house and was filled with acerbic musings of the kind that only Larkin can conjure (*Sad Steps*). Then the Finzi. Jeffreys (one of the most underrated of all English Song composers, in my opinion) described that ghostly time just before dawn in *Omens*. Finally, Lord Alfred Douglas' *Night coming out of a garden* saw night retreat in the face of the coming day, which exploded with Quilter's sparkling setting of Blake's joyful shout, *Daybreak*.

I had no idea what to expect when I went for the first round. I had worked hard on the programme with a brilliant pianist friend of mine. As everyone's programmes were on view in the paperwork, I was slightly perturbed to note that my programme was rather heavier on the poetry than the others. However, all went well and I was elated to find out I had reached the final.

The experience of singing in the final competition was wonderful. I knew my vocal technique was nowhere near as polished as my fellow competitors but, given that my goal had been to reach the final, I felt that I had already won and resolved to simply enjoy myself! It must be said that there was a very supportive atmosphere at the competition final. All the competitors got ready and warmed up in the same rooms and I found them all warm and friendly (which was hugely appreciated as I felt rather out of my depth). When I came second, I was stunned (I don't think I made great conversation that evening). Getting to meet and have my photograph taken with Patricia Routledge was definitely a highlight. Feedback from the judges was very positive and included some useful suggestions for the future.

After the competition, time passed and I changed my direction from engineering to full-time music (although I did eventually complete my doctorate, much to the relief of my supervisors!). I can't remember quite how it happened, but I realised that the deadline for this year's competition was approaching. I had always felt that I wanted to try again once I was confident that I could bring more vocal finesse to the table and, having started a post-graduate course at the RWCMD, it felt that the time was right.

Having constructed one programme already was a great help, although – as it was 2014 – I was already sure that I wanted to create a programme around some of the immensely powerful poems and songs that came out of the unholy conflagration that was the First World War, the 100th anniversary of the start of which fell just a few months after the final. Although I didn't want to repeat the same structure as in 2012, I again ended up with quasi-narrative framework: John Jeffreys' setting of *Black Stichel* ponders the gathering forcing of war, which was announced by Asquith to Parliament in a declaration that is nowhere near as familiar as that of Chamberlain's because there was of course no radio. The insistent beat of a military drum accompanies the soldiers 'marching all to war' in Gurney's setting of AE Housman's *On the idle hill of summer*, and Wilfred Owen's letter tells of arrival at the mud of the front. Elgar's *A war song* (1894) was included because it typifies the kind of bellicose pomposity that carried many men to their deaths in Flanders fields – in fact, I found it so odious and distasteful that I only sang one verse, but it served to make the point. Another of Owen's letters describes the hell of 'going over the top', and Jeffreys' *Otterburn* tells of 'the lad who went to Flanders and never will return'. Owen's harrowing *Spring Offensive* fails to make sense of the slaughter, before the final sucker punch of Ireland's *Spring Sorrow* talks simply of the tentative green shoots that come after even this, the hardest of winters. It was not an easy programme to sing.

Again, the experience of the first round and of the final was wholly positive. I think receiving first prize was one of my proudest moments. My one regret was not being able to demonstrate my progress to Patricia Routledge, who was sadly unable to attend this year.

I can only encourage people who share my love of English Art Song to enter this competition. Singers who realise that this is about

creating a properly cohesive marriage of poetry and song will find that they have an immediate advantage over those with hastily assembled collections of songs with a poem thrown in to meet the requirements. The experience it gave me of programme construction was invaluable and I can't think of any other opportunity like it to deliver what can be a truly personal performance. Not only that, but I learnt that poetry and song deserve to share the stage, there are no two ways about it! I have now given recitals in which I create opportunities for poetry readings – in my opinion, this should not be seen as an idiosyncrasy!