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NEWSLETTER AUGUST 2013

A NOTE FROM THE CHAIRMAN

The first half of the AESS Centenary Year has been a tremendous success and I would like to thank everyone who took part in the day of events at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, which culminated in the final of the Patricia Routledge Competition. The 'visitors' book', which I kept that day, overflowed with signatures of those who attended and it was so good to have two of our Honorary Presidents, Patricia Routledge and Michael Chance, present for most of the day and for another Honorary President, Robert Saxton, to be among the eminent group of speakers. Thanks are due to all those at the Guildhall who helped throughout the day and for allowing us use of the Music Hall without charge.

The AGM and Dinner were attended by a record number of members and guests who enjoyed the insights of our guest speaker Dame Felicity Lott and the sparkling entertainment provided by Richard Suart.

The Courtney Kenny Award, The Patricia Routledge National English Song Competition and the first staging of The Fell Musical Theatre Prize were keenly contested and gave us most worthy winners. Later this year the Catherine Lambert Junior Recital Prize will be held once again at the Royal College of Music, courtesy of the Junior Department as part of their Saturday Music School.

I am delighted that the final three volumes of the 'A Century of English Song' series are nearing publication. Ideas regarding distribution would be welcome.

The list of forthcoming Centenary events is still ongoing. If you have a concert which you would like publicised and which could contain the AESS logo, please contact Stephen Miles.

Those who have helped with all the above events and in many other ways this year are too numerous to mention individually so I would simply like to give a heartfelt thank-you to everybody concerned. Details of many of the happenings of the year are in this newsletter, which is a bumper edition.

Membership of the Association has now passed 200. This is great news but please keep endeavouring to recruit those who are sympathetic to our aims.

Graham Trew

The AESS Senior Prize - A Co-ordinator's View

The **AESS Centenary Day** back in May concluded with ***The Patricia Routledge National English Song Competition 2013*** and yes, we are still looking for a more concise title!

The AESS continues to be extremely grateful to Miss Routledge for her generosity in sponsoring this competition. £5,000 in prize-money is shared between three singers and a pianist. As the co-ordinator, and having now run this competition for six years, I have realised the need to be available to entrants who may misunderstand the purpose of the competition and to those who need guidance in honing their programmes and who are unsure how to realise best their chosen theme in practice. On occasions, I am seconded to the preliminary round judging panel and it is absorbing to witness the programmes I have seen on paper and possibly discussed with the singers and to hear how they pan out.

First of all, I point out if asked, or if the programme looks too long, that *less is more* in almost all circumstances. The programme examples given on the AESS website do not and cannot identify the innumerable ways in which a performer might take possession of the material at hand. I always suggest that an entrant take the listener on a journey and how he does that is entirely up to him. The rules for the competition state that the programme must include prose or poetry, and art songs originally set in the English language. Occasionally, an inquiry or programme item causes a rethink on how to express the rules, but one has to apply a common sense and flexible approach, making sure that decisions on whether to allow certain pieces are fair to all those entering the competition. Sometimes one wishes that a certain singer had inquired about his programme or the manner in which it is to be presented. Often, a rather long spoken introduction promises much but little of it is actually delivered through interpretation of either discipline of speech or song. Imagination is the key and another very important ingredient is *staying in the moment*, i.e., not breaking the thought process during a song or poem and the connection to the next part of the recital. The speech element can be a great way of linking the musical numbers and enhancing their meaning either by continuity or with sudden contrasting themes. Casting the programme as a single entity and not as several individual items will give a sweep to proceedings that may carry the listener to an unimagined aural landscape that can, on occasion, be extremely moving. It is important that the final impression of a recital be that the sum has been greater than its parts.

This year there was a very strong preliminary round. The singers who took part were at either end of the age range allowed for the competition and experience mingled with naive energy. For my money, the best kind of programme is one that sticks closely to the theme. It should not be an easy opt-out, such as

half an existing song cycle and a couple of poems. It needs to be an organic whole, which explores the nooks and crannies of English song, poetry and prose, as well as the original words of the performer. By the time the entry form comes before the co-ordinator, it is usually too late to do much about the content and I feel there needs to be a detailed discussion with teachers about the suitability of the programme so that it is balanced and has a good shape. It is then that artistry, musicality and the partnership with a pianist can take flight. It can be the case that the chosen material works against the aspirations of the singer. Programmes of a single composer, a single poem stuck at the end of the recital or a perfunctory introduction are not really what are required here. The programme needs to be a reflection of the singer's intent and not a cut and paste job. There were several worthy entries, superbly executed, but there were also questions about technique and presentation. Sometimes, a well intentioned and proficient performance is let down in some way by technical concerns, a lack of clarity with diction, or not identifying with or fully understanding the texts. Singers also need to understand the difference between recital technique and a more *operatic* approach.

At the end of the preliminary round, the judges may have to decide between fifteen or so recitals, all of which are heard in their entirety. With luck, a decision is soon reached on the five finalists as deliberation can take place throughout the day. Feedback is given to all entrants. This is a unique feature of the competition, I believe. Those who have not been fortunate to go through to the final are always encouraged to enter the competition again at a future date. For clarification, pianists are only eligible for the accompanist's prize if their singer makes it past the preliminary stage. Unfortunately, this does mean that some fine players are not heard in the final.

As co-ordinator at the final, I flit between front of house and backstage trying to keep the performers, judges AND audience happy. Without giving away the secrets of the debating room, I can divulge that it took at least thirty minutes for the judges to get near to a decision on the winning order. There was a stand out performance by a pianist, but the eventual order of the singers was hotly contested which proved the high standard of performance. Unlike in some other years, the winner of 2013 was also a popular choice with the audience according to my straw poll, and I believe Patricia Routledge was also pleased as she presented the prizes.

Next year, we will be at the Royal College of Music. See you next time.

Stephen Miles

NEWS FROM MEMBERS

ANTHONY DAWSON

AESS member Anthony Dawson - who sang with the English Opera Group and the English Music Theatre Company in the 1970s and early 80s with the professional name of Anthony Attwell - has given three illustrated talks recently, as part of the Britten Centenary celebrations, entitled: **A Passion for Britten**. He has appeared in the Sacconi Chamber Music Festival in Folkestone and has spoken to the 6th Form at Sevenoaks School and to an appreciative audience in King's Week at King's School, Canterbury.

Anthony draws on reminiscences of his years spent at Aldeburgh, where he and his wife had a small flat in Beth Welford's house (Benjamin Britten's sister) while he studied with Peter Pears at the Britten-Pears School. He also includes several amusing anecdotes told him by Peter Pears of life with Benjamin Britten.

As a professional singer with the EOG and EMT, Anthony took part in many of Britten's operas such as 'Curlew River', 'Burning Fiery Furnace', 'Prodigal Son', 'Albert Herring', 'Turn of the Screw' and 'Midsummer Night's Dream', as well as 'Death in Venice' at Covent Garden and Aldeburgh and in the Tony Palmer film. In 1976 he was singing the role of Hot Biscuit Slim in Britten's first opera, 'Paul Bunyan', on tour with the English Music Theatre on the night when Britten died. Earlier in the year, the EMT had given the first staged performance of 'Paul Bunyan' in Snape Maltings, in the presence of the composer, who was moved to tears to see the piece he'd written in 1941 brought back to life in his own concert hall.

If members wish to contact Anthony about his talk, his web site address is: www.playandsing.info where full contact details are available. He will be delighted to hear from anyone who would like him to give his talk at schools or for a music club so that he can share his passion for the operas of Benjamin Britten with others.

SALLY BURGESS

Sally is currently in Dubrovnik where her new production of 'Cosi fan Tutte' will have had its premier 11 July in the Dubrovnik Summer Festival. This is the biggest collaborative opera production in Croatia this year.

There is an international double cast, including Maltese tenor Nicholas Darmanin who studied at the Royal College of Music and the National Opera Studio, and Welsh mezzo Sian Cameron who studied at the Royal Academy of Music and Cardiff Academy. Other singers are from Croatia, Bulgaria, Italy, Russia and Scandinavia.

In other news - in May, Sally ran her second seven-day workshop with Russian singers in Nice, collaborating with London Gates Education Group and Les Azuriales Opera Festival. They will work in Moscow with singers again in October 2013.

Sally is also beginning a new project in September with Associated Studios. She will direct whole acts from operas with young professional singers on a two0day a week course. Final performances will be at the Actor's Church, St Paul's Covent Garden on the 29th and 30th of November 2013.

Sally continues her work with vocal tuition, opera scenes and stagecraft classes at the Royal College of Music as well as her regular three-month opera project with the Guildhall Scholl of Music and Drama singers during their Spring term 2014 - a Rameau opera.

Stephen Varcoe - Music at Ansells Farm

Ten years ago we began giving Song masterclasses at our home in the beautiful Essex-Suffolk border country. I've travelled such a lot over the years, and we live in such an idyllic setting that we thought it would be a good idea to invite people to come to us for a change. The pattern during that time has been that a maximum of eight participants come here for a day to work with me on songs related to a chosen theme, and incidentally to enjoy the countryside and the remarkable food which my wife Melinda prepares. The material which people choose to sing covers a wide range of periods, languages and styles, with English song as only one part of the mix. We welcome all who are interested in the song repertoire, be they amateurs, teachers, students or professionals.

We are fortunate in having a wonderful old Suffolk barn; it can hold an audience of 85, which perfectly suits the spirit of friendly informal music-making we enjoy. So since 2009 we've expanded the day-long workshops (which still continue very successfully and regularly throughout the year) to involve a whole weekend at the end of June, with three concerts in the barn. These are open to the public, and have quickly become an immensely popular fixture in the musical calendar of our part of East Anglia. We still have eight participants who work on their chosen repertoire of songs, and especially focus on putting together and presenting a short programme; but the weekend begins on the Friday evening when everyone gets together for supper and the first of the concerts.

This first concert always consists of a varied and entertaining programme of words and music which I devise, each year on a different theme, performed by me and a distinguished guest presenter. This year eminent actor Julian Glover joined me for a sea-themed evening entitled 'Full Fathom Five'. Other years have seen us welcome actors Prunella Scales and Timothy West, garden historian Caroline Holmes and renowned soprano Patricia Rozario for programmes covering topics from wine, travel and the world of flowers and plants, to the animal kingdom. Participants can stay either with us or nearby, and on the Saturday there is an intensive whole day of teaching. Then on the Saturday evening there's another concert – this year we enjoyed Crispian Steele-Perkins regaling us with his bag of trumpet tricks, while last year we had acclaimed chamber ensemble The Fibonacci Sequence – and on the Sunday a further morning of teaching. At teatime on the Sunday the students perform to a public audience some of the items they've been working on, followed by a relaxed open-air tea party before everyone goes home. New repertoire is explored, new friends are made and confidence and accomplishment honed and polished. The success of this formula has been extraordinary – we're already planning next year's weekend!

I thought the AESS might be interested to know about this venture to bring the performance of song and the spoken word to an enthusiastic and receptive audience here in the depths of the countryside, and that it's proving so successful. If anyone would like to know more about our workshops, or be put on the mailing list for details of concerts, do contact me at stephen@varcoe.com

NIGEL FOSTER, DIRECTOR OF THE LONDON SONG FESTIVAL: A look backwards and forwards

I'd like to say a very big thank you to the AESS for their continuing support of the London Song Festival.

The May/June segment consisted of three concerts at the beautiful church of St Paul's Covent Garden, centred round the AESS Centenary concert on May 29th. The performers were two marvellous singers who are no strangers to the AESS: soprano Sarah Leonard and baritone Stephen Varcoe, with me playing the piano. The programme consisted of songs from the ten volumes of 'A Century of English Song'; that wonderful series of publications put together by the AESS, spanning the entire twentieth century and containing many master-pieces of the English Song repertoire both known and unknown. The final three volumes are still in the hands of the publisher and will be issued soon. It was a great pleasure to be able to include two of the three prize-winning songs from the Association's song-writing competition: these were 'Charity' by Michael Betteridge and Rose Miranda Hall's 'For Amber'. Both composers were in the audience, as were a further three of the featured composers: Clive Pollard, Patricia Williams and Betty Roe. It was a joy also to welcome quite a few AESS members to the concert including committee members.

The AESS Centenary concert was sandwiched between two concerts celebrating the bicentenaries of Verdi and Wagner, with performances of the complete song output of both composers: Wagner on May 23rd, sung by Elisabeth Meister and Matthew Hargreaves, and Verdi on June 5th with Elizabeth Llewellyn and Nicholas Ransley. Both these concerts included some very rarely heard songs, in some cases only published in various journals, and these were the only occasions, certainly in the UK, when these composers' entire output of songs could be heard together in a single concert. I am happy to say that audiences for all three concerts were the largest to date for the Festival. The first of this year's Festival master-classes was given on June 11th by the ever-inspiring Sarah Walker CBE.

My attention is now turning to the next group of concerts, which will take place in the autumn. Of particular interest to AESS members will be celebrations of the Britten centenary, and I will also be marking the 90th birthday of the great American song composer Ned Rorem, whose massive output of superb songs is still relatively unknown on this side of the Atlantic. His epic cycle of 36 songs, 'Evidence of Things Not Seen' will begin this part of the Festival on the composer's birthday, October 23rd, performed by Andrew Kennedy, Jennifer Johnston and Gillian Keith. Other highlights include a concert with Elizabeth Watts and Ashley Riches on Oct 30th, Ruby Hughes on November 4th, and BBC Radio 3 New Generation Artist Robin Tritschler and baritone Jeremy Huw Williams on Nov 13th. The now-traditional concert of comedy songs will be on November 6th and the line-up is completed by the second of this year's master-classes, given by one of the UK's greatest accompanists, my old teacher Roger Vignoles. Full details of these concerts will be posted shortly on the Festival website www.londonsongfestival.org and it will be wonderful to welcome as many AESS members as possible to these concerts.

MATT FOX AND 'MADRABABES'

Presented as part of the Camden Fringe, this Swindon-based Theatre Company, Madam Renards, presents a brand new musical comedy 'Madrababes': a bawdy comic musical based on that most historic of vocal music styles - The Madrigal. Written by Matt Fox & Jessie Thompson, with silly humour, cross-dressing and lots of general rudeness, Madrababes puts an historical twist on the contemporary Jukebox Musical.

Jessie Thompson, musical arranger of the piece said, "Madrigals originated in Italy in around 1520 and are beautiful, polyphonic vocal music, with a number of different unaccompanied singers. They can be serious or comic, sublime or incredibly rude, and I've chosen a selection of them to use in Madrababes."

Matt Fox who supplied the script said; "We really wanted to juxtapose the beautiful madrigals with a script which is very contemporary, very silly and quite rude. There's cross dressing, there's seduction and there's plenty of very seriously suggestive humour."

Madrababes recently featured in The Madam Renards Mini Fringe, a brand new fringe theatre festival based in Swindon. It received the following review by Abby Sparrow: 'One of the main words that popped into my head when I first started watching Madrababes was fun. A one-act musical made up entirely of madrigals, a form of early music pop music. Please be advised to leave your serious hats at the door for an hour of entertaining quips and silliness, a story of six friends finding love through jokes and song. We meet John and Tom, two stylish elegant 'men' lamenting their lack of luck with their lady friends Phyllis and Philomela. Could it possibly be because they are far more worried about what they're wearing than displays of manliness? The ladies are equally lamenting about the lack of decent men in the area when in walks Amyntas, a tall man with a real, not drawn-on, beard and a deep voice. Naturally fighting ensues and much harmonised singing. There was some great vocal work from all performers particularly Stephanie Walsh as Phyllis. The comic timing of Ellie Lawrence and Jessie Thompson as John and Tom almost stole the show had it not been for Annabelle Black as fair Oriana, ever-present and scowling from behind her harp and stack of books only pausing to throw barbed insults. There was no doubt that her hatred towards the rest of the characters was sincere which meant all the more fun for the audience. Great vocal arrangements and a wonderful cast make for a fun show which will lift the most miserable of spirits.'

Performance details:

Venue - Theatre Etcetera (situated above the Oxford Arms), 265 Camden High St London, Greater London NW1 7BU

Date – Friday 23rd, Saturday 24th and Sunday 25th August.

Time - 7.30pm each day

Tickets - £8 each and can be purchased by ringing 020 7482 4857 or via the Theatre Etcetera Website

www.etceteratheatre.com

MATT FOX AND 'TO SLEEP'

Also presented as part of the Camden Fringe, 'To Sleep' covers one night in the lives of two suicidal strangers. 'To Sleep' is a brand new play by Matt Fox, which explores how people deal with the most difficult human situations. Produced by Madam Renards & controversial theatre company TS Theatre, 'To Sleep' is original British drama, performed by two fabulous actors: Peter Hynds & Ellie Lawrence.

With warmth, compassion and dark humour, 'To Sleep' shows how relationships can develop between different people no matter how appalling their shared experiences might be.

Writer Matt Fox said; "With 'To Sleep', I wanted to write a piece which was raw and tragic, but also had real humour in it. I think humour is one of the most powerful tools in a writer's arsenal, and certainly in 'To Sleep', the tragedy is all the more powerful because of the black comedy which runs through the piece."

To Sleep recently featured in The Madam Renards Mini Fringe, a brand new fringe theatre festival based in Swindon. It received the following review by Victoria Twigg: 'Watching a play depicting the final tortuous moments of two suicidal companions may not sound like your idea of a good night out but to say Matt Fox's latest play, 'To Sleep', is about the depressing subject of suicide, is to suggest 'The Life of Pi' is about a tiger in a boat, i.e., you're missing the point. Staged in the intimate back room of the Victoria Pub in Swindon's Old Town, 'To Sleep' tells the story of 17-year old Hayley (Ellie Lawrence) and 39-year old Martin (Peter Hynds) who meet in dubious circumstances in A&E – they have both 'hurt their wrists'. Hayley, a predictable surly teen, spits sarcasm and unsympathetic put-downs at downtrodden Martin. She cares little for his banged wrists and how they met a 'Stanley knife': "Got to be careful with those arts and crafts" she teases. Over 60 minutes, we learn why the pair are suicidal, leaving the audience to ponder the uncomfortable dilemma of whether there can ever be moral justification for taking one's life. Perfectly placed black humour is subtly peppered throughout the performance as it boldly deals with the practicalities of ending a life: "Hanging....paracetamol....bullet to the brain?" The dilemma of what to wear: "dress ...three-piece suit....rock t-shirt?" And what details to include in a suicide note: "If I can raise a smile on the face of the person who has to clean this up, then I won't feel quite as bad." It's an audacious endeavour to pair suicide with humour, but Fox does that as sublimely as brie and grapes, strawberries and balsamic vinegar. It shouldn't work, but it does. 'To Sleep' is a powerful production of tragedy, trauma, regret, life and friendship. Don't be deterred by the uncomfortable subject matter. Undeniably, 'To Sleep' is heart-breaking, but its tenderness makes it mesmerising. It is tragic but beautiful; you'll be pleased you went to see it.'

Performances details:

Venue: The Forge Venue, 3-7 Delancey Street, London, NW1 7NL

Date – Tuesday 20th & Wednesday 21st August at 7.30pm

Tickets - £10 each and can be purchased by ringing 0207 383 7808 or via the Forge Website

www.camdenfringe.com. For further information please contact Matt Fox on 01793 709722 or 07876766088. Email - Gib_son2001@yahoo.co.uk

PREVIOUS COMPETITION WINNER – AN UPDATE

HELEN-JANE HOWELLS

Helen-Jane was the winner of the 2010 Patricia Routledge Competition, she has recently been working with the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment at 'Bach Unwrapped', Kings Place and with Music Theatre Wales for the UK premiere of 'Ping' and had her debut on 'In Tune, BBC Radio 3' ahead of two performances for this past Easter's series at King's College, Cambridge. She continues to enjoy recital work and this year will once again be artist-in-residence at the Presteigne Festival. In the summer, she performs the title role in 'Dido & Aeneas' with Florilegium at the Bath International Music Festival and continues her collaboration with French baroque group, La Fenice, in the Uzès and Lyon Festivals ('Dido' and 'King Arthur'). This year also sees the release of two CDs, on which Helen-Jane is a soloist: La Nuova Musica, 'Dixit Dominus' (Harmonia Mundi) and Joseph Phibbs, 'Canticle of the Rose' with the Navarra Quartet (NMC).