



*The Association of English Singers & Speakers*

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## **NEWSLETTER AUGUST 2014**

### **A NOTE FROM THE CHAIRMAN**

Since the January newsletter, the Association has staged three competitions, organised a concert celebrating the work of Michael Head, and held the AGM and Annual Dinner. Membership has risen to 218. Hopefully the last stages of copyright negotiations will be concluded in time for the 'A Century of English Song' volumes to be published before I relinquish the Chairmanship. In all areas, the AESS is continuing to move ahead and to spread its influence.

Three gifted winners emerged from those who entered the Courtney Kenny Award, the Patricia Routledge National English Song Competition and the Fell Musical Theatre Prize. It was good that William Vann, already an AESS member, who organises his own English Song Festival annually in London, won the accompanist's prize in the senior competition.

Many AESS members took part in the tribute to Michael Head, organised superbly by Patricia Williams. Eastbourne was inviting in the sunshine and the appreciative audience was treated to a well-devised programme which ended suitably with a recording of Michael Head singing and accompanying himself on the piano.

I am grateful to Michael Pilkington for accepting the task of collating the AESS archive, which passes from chairman to chairman in ever-increasing numbers of cardboard boxes! There are some fascinating documents in the collection and some very famous signatures at the end of the monthly minutes, including that of Sir Henry Wood. It is sad that any record of the Association in its early stages was either not documented, or has been lost. Although later histories tell us that the AESS began in 1913, the first record book that exists does not begin until the 1930s.

The Association website has had a 'makeover' and looks more modern and vibrant. It is also, I am assured by our webmaster, much easier to update. This will be good news for the member who is willing to come forward to be our new webmaster from next April. If you have computer skills or know of someone who does, the AESS needs a volunteer to take over from Matthew Dickins, who created the website ten years ago but who has a very busy career to pursue. We also urgently need a voluntary, Hon. Secretary, preferably someone who could begin on September 29<sup>th</sup>, when we hold our first committee meeting of the academic year at the Royal Academy of Music.

To avoid Easter and the busy musical run-up to it for many members, it has been decided to hold the AGM/Dinner on April 12<sup>th</sup> next year. This flies in the face of our constitution! It may be that we will propose an amended rule to be voted on by the committee in September and ratified in an email vote by members later this year. Lastly, I am delighted that Courtney Kenny has agreed to provide the entertainment before the Dinner next year.

**Graham Trew MVO**

## **NEWS FROM MEMBERS**

**SALLY BURGESS** (via Linda Hirst at Trinity Laban - a heads up for 2015!)

Puzzle Piece Opera, the small student led opera group from Trinity Laban, performed their 50 minute *Così fan Tutte* in St. Mary Abbots Vicarage Garden on July 21<sup>st</sup>, to an audience of 50 for opera and supper in the garden and a further audience of onlookers from Hamilton House, the smart block of flats which overlooks the garden. Everyone was thrilled with the students' singing and acting and I was enormously proud of them all. This year's graduates are the best ever, and it was so nice to finish the year with this performance – we'll do it again and invite more people!

**PATRICIA WILLIAMS - Unsung Heroes - how it came about**

'To encourage the communication of English words, in singing and speech, with clarity, understanding and imagination' is the stated aim of AESS, and certainly our competitions for young performers and composers go a long way towards fulfilling it.

However, the committee is keen to find other routes, too, and a chance word by an adult pupil of mine sparked an idea. "You know," she said, " every time I look at a new Armstrong Gibbs song it is so different from the last one". My first thought was that probably very few singers know more than three Armstrong Gibbs songs and my second - that perhaps the AESS could help prevent his fall into anonymity. So, the first 'Unsung Heroes' concert evolved, celebrating Gibbs and his favourite poet, Walter de la Mare. Taking place in Gibbs' favoured county of Essex, it was much enjoyed by performers and audience alike.

Following a secondary aim to widen the geographical scope of activities, the second 'Unsung Heroes' concert in Eastbourne in June was an equal delight. It celebrated Michael Head who is known for a couple of carols and a few songs but composed more than a hundred, many of them unjustly neglected.

Michael Head was a brilliant pianist (professor at the Royal Academy from his mid-twenties) and a fine singer who, unusually, etched out an international performing career accompanying himself at the piano. It was not just 'easy listening' songs with simple accompaniments that he performed but the best Lieder of Schubert, Strauss and Brahms, the Art Songs of his English contemporaries and his own compositions. If any of you know *The Estuary*, you will know that both voice part and piano part are very challenging. Doing them both at once is the musical equivalent of Ginger Rogers "doing everything that Fred Astaire did but backwards in high heels!"

When the project was announced in January there were a few immediate offers from members to perform and then a two month lull. But quite suddenly things began to pick up. A singer was in touch who had been coached by Michael Head in the early seventies on several of his songs. More singers volunteered and some readers too, allowing exploration of Nancy Bush's memoir of her brother and of some of Head's chosen poets. We decided, as Head was born in Eastbourne, to publicise the event through local arts listings and gained an audience that included a pianist who studied with him in 1947!!! and several who had been adjudicated by him in Festivals.

The end result was a concert in which seasoned professionals, student singers, accompanists and speakers collaborated to give a fascinating, if brief, insight into the life and works of this most English of composers through some thirty of his songs.

Putting all of this together was an absorbing and rewarding task and I was so grateful to those who generously gave their time and talents to make it happen, not only performers but the workers behind the scenes producing refreshments, programmes and other practical help.

So who should be the next 'Unsung Hero'? Answers on an email, please to: Patricia Williams at [williams.typhnigerror@tiscali.co.uk](mailto:williams.typhnigerror@tiscali.co.uk)

## Susan Bullock receives honour



Susan Bullock awarded CBE (Raphaëlle Photography)

Soprano Susan Bullock has been awarded a CBE for services to music. She said, "I am absolutely thrilled to receive this honour. To spend my life doing something that I dearly love is a great privilege, and to be recognised in this way is not only very moving for me, but also wonderful for this fantastic art form which must be cherished at all costs."

## **The 2014 London Song Festival**

**October 21<sup>st</sup> - November 27<sup>th</sup>, Rosslyn Hill Chapel, Hampstead, London NW3 1NG**

I am delighted that the AESS is once again supporting the London Song Festival. As in previous years the Festival will incorporate a widely ranging selection of music, and all but one of the five concerts will include English music, including some very rarely heard gems. The concert dates are:

### **Tuesday October 21<sup>st</sup> – 'Music of a Foreign Land'**

The opening concert is given by Ailish Tynan, who has been a BBC New Generation Artist, a member of the prestigious Jette Parker Programme of the Royal Opera House Covent Garden and winner of the Song Prize at the 2003 Cardiff Singer of the World Competition. She is joined by outstanding young baritone Simon Wallfisch, who was born into a family of distinguished musicians but is rapidly making his name as one of the hottest young talents around. The programme explores songs inspired by countries and cultures other than those of the composer and poet. We include a selection of Granville Bantock's rarely heard Chinese Lyrics and songs from his Five Ghazals of Hafiz, from Gustav Holst's Vedic Hymns, inspired by Indian music, gems such as Herbert Howells' masterpiece King David, inspired by Hebrew legend, Peter Warlock's Heraclitus, a setting of a translation of an ancient Greek text and Geoffrey Bush's wonderful Greek Love Songs. One of the highlights of the concert will be a selection of Isaac Nathan's Hebrew Melodies. Isaac Nathan died 150 years ago and his Hebrew Melodies, with texts by his friend Lord Byron, were the sensational 'hits' of their day, running to several early editions. Nathan emigrated to Australia in 1841, having claimed to have carried out secret missions for the Royal family for which he was never paid by the government, to become known as the 'Father of Australian Music' as a result of his early research into Aboriginal music and the fact that he wrote the first opera to be composed and performed in Australia, a work which was resurrected by his descendant Sir Charles Mackerras.

### **Thursday October 30<sup>th</sup> – 'Late Romantics'**

A recital given by the Russian soprano Ilona Domnich, described by Opera Now as 'a voice of silken beauty', which will include the premiere of two songs by Michael Csanyi-Wills, a young British composer of Hungarian descent, setting the composer's mother's final letter written to her children before she was killed by the Nazis in Hungary in October 1944. Apart from his 'serious' composing, Michael is also a noted writer of film scores, including *The Little Vampire* and *The Trouble with Dot and Harry* starring Neil Morrissey. He was recently appointed Composer-in-Residence of the Welsh Sinfonia.

### **Tuesday November 11<sup>th</sup> – Richard Strauss Celebration**

This concert will not contain any English Song, but has a strong British connection as

it is a reconstruction of a recital given by Richard Strauss and his wife Pauline de Ahna in St James's Hall in London on December 9<sup>th</sup> 1903. The Strausses were regular visitors to London and their recitals in the English capital were always eagerly anticipated events in the musical calendar of this city. The evening will also include a talk given by Jacqueline Straubinger-Bremar, whose father, Cedric, was an RAF Intelligence Officer based in Germany in the 1940s. Strauss is known to have communicated information about the Nazi Party to Cedric during these years during meetings lubricated by bottles of Strauss' beloved Gordon's Gin that he had regularly brought back from his trips to London before the war and squirreled away in his house in Garmisch. The singer for this concert is Regina Nathan, whose career in opera, concert and recital has taken her from her native Ireland across Europe, and as far as Kuala Lumpur and New York's Carnegie Hall. She has appeared in opera at Madrid's Teatro Réal, Brussels' La Monnaie, the Hamburg Staatsoper, Opéra de Genève, Luzern Stadttheater, Israeli Opera, Scottish Opera, Opera de Nice, Opéra de Nantes, Glyndebourne Touring Opera, Opera Zuid, Stadttheater Giessen, as well as Opera.

### **Tuesday November 18<sup>th</sup> – Young Artists' Showcase**

A recital given by two outstanding young singers; soprano Sinead O'Kelly from the Royal College of Music and Dominic Sedgwick from the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. This concert is part of the London Song Festival's continuing policy of giving young up-and-coming singers a platform to perform the Song repertoire. Sinead was the winner of the AESS Courtney Kenny Award in 2013 and Dominic was the runner-up, so this concert will be of particular interest to AESS members. The English element of this programme will include songs with a war theme by George Butterworth, John Ireland and Ivor Gurney.

### **Thursday November 27<sup>th</sup> – Entartete Musik**

A recital given by baritone Peter Brathwaite, taking the form of a critical song-based reconstruction of the infamous Düsseldorf exhibition of 1938, intended by the Nazis to alert the German public to “inferior and dangerous” forms of music, particularly jazz and Jewish music. While not including any music by English composers, this concert includes songs in the English language by, among others, Kurt Weill and Hanns Eisler, who both fled Nazi Germany in 1933. Peter Brathwaite is an alumnus of the Britten-Pears Young Artist Programme and was the winner of the Samuel Coleridge Taylor Award presented by Grace Bumbry at the 2009 Voice of Black Opera Competition.

In addition to these five concerts, there will be a master-class given by the noted exponent of English Song, Ian Partridge CBE, and it is expected that English Song will form a considerable part of the repertoire chosen by the 14 young singers that he will be working with. The master-class takes place on Saturday November 8<sup>th</sup>, with sessions at 2pm and 6pm

All the concerts take place at Rosslyn Hill Chapel, just down the hill from Hampstead tube station, and all begin at 7.30pm. All members of the AESS will be entitled to the concessionary ticket price for all the concerts and the master-class, and I look forward to welcoming as many as can make it to Rosslyn Hill Chapel in the autumn.

**Nigel Foster (Director – The London Song Festival)**

# COMPETITIONS

## THE PATRICIA ROUTLEDGE NATIONAL ENGLISH SONG COMPETITION

This year was evidence that the old saying *to try and try again* can pay off handsomely. There were some hard hitters in the presence of previous winners of both the Junior and Intermediate competitions. Thirteen singers competed for the prize. It has to be said that some programmes did not show much thought or imagination in their preparation. Rarely do programmes of one composer do well. The more mature singers of the Senior Prize also needed to show that they are real performers, with their chosen material fully in their grasp. The audience needs to be taken on a journey. Two years ago, **Alexei Winter** came second in this competition. He has written eloquently in this newsletter about his approach to the preparation of his performances. This year, he produced an highly intelligent and intensely moving programme on the theme of war. His was a very popular win and he was the second student from the RWCMD to achieve success. AESS member, **William Vann**, picked up the award for the pianist of the evening with his eloquent and supportive playing. He lived and breathed the whole programme along with his singer. Both are now Honorary Members of the AESS and we look forward to their future contributions to the association.

## THE COURTNEY KENNY AWARD 2014

Competitions can take a while to bed down in the imagination of teachers, conservatoires, schools and students. On the basis of the number of applicants this year, the Courtney Kenny Award has now *arrived*. A total of twenty-three singers took part in this year's competition, with entrants from a wide range of educational backgrounds. The AESS competitions are a challenge, with the dual disciplines of the speech and song elements, and not everyone understands the need for a thought through programme, with a wide variety of material to produce what might be considered a unique, emotional vehicle for the singer and pianist. Rapport is vital, and this year, it was sometimes evident that pianists were not fully on board with the theme, sense of drama and the necessary ebb and flow of a programme.

The five finalist were well versed in their programmes which were full of variety, although love and Shakespeare featured a great deal. In the end, the first prize went to the baritone, **Meilir Jones**, for his well-crafted and beautifully performed programme, *Love is brittle*. Meilir was the first of two singers from the RWCMD this year to win an AESS competition. There must be something in the Welsh water! The pianist's prize went to **William Shaw**.

As always, the AESS is extremely grateful to the generous sponsors of the competitions.

**Stephen Miles - Co-ordinator**

## ALEXEI WINTER – Winner 2014 Patricia Routledge National Song Competition

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 competition. 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 the 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 100<sup>th</sup> 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 forces 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!

## **THE FELL MUSICAL THEATRE PRIZE**

Thirteen entrants competed for the £1000 award, including competitors from the Royal Welsh College of Music & Drama, the Royal Academy of Music, the University of Chichester, Performers College, Guildhall School of Music & Drama, Arts Educational School, East 15 Acting School and one private student of an AESS member.

There was a great variety of material, showing the care the competitors had taken in compiling their six minute presentations. They all supported each other by sitting in the audience throughout the prize, only leaving to prepare for their own "slot".

The adjudicator, Marilyn Cutts, gave a very comprehensive talk at the end, covering the points that she felt they could build on. Both non-competitors and competitors were given an interesting insight into the requirements of a performer.

Sarah Leonard, Chairman Elect of the AESS, thanked Marilyn and the competitors for a very enjoyable afternoon. Chris Mear, the official accompanist, and those brought in by the competitors also were thanked for their work.

The prize was awarded to **Lizzy Andretta**, from the East 15 Acting School, who performed 'Val's Monologue' & 'Dance: Ten, Looks: Three' from *A Chorus Line*.

Thanks to all the AESS members and friends who were able to come and support this prize in its second year.

Thanks to the Sylvia Young School for hosting the competition and to the Tony Fell Trust for its generosity in sponsoring the competition.

Photo: Marilyn Cutts presenting the award to Lizzy Andretta.

