



The Association of English Singers & Speakers

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NEWSLETTER JULY 2012

A NOTE FROM THE CHAIRMAN

There have been two excellent competitions since the last newsletter. Courtney Kenny chaired the panel for his prize which produced an excellent winner in Elizabeth Desbruslais and Patricia Routledge attended, spoke and presented the prizes at the Royal Academy of Music in May, where the winner was Hadleigh Adams.

Sarah Leonard gave a masterclass on behalf of the AESS at Lincoln Minster School and we have continued to sponsor two festivals, the 'London English Song Festival' held in May and the London Song Festival, which will take place in November. They are both organised by AESS members, William Vann and Nigel Foster.

Our AGM and Annual Dinner was enlivened by the superb entertainment provided by Jane Roberson and her 'Churchfields Singers' and by our guest speaker, Professor Robert Saxton, who fascinated us all with his talk on word setting from a composers viewpoint.

Earlier this year it was decided to hold a composition competition in time for the winning song or songs to be performed during the Centenary and possibly to be published in the final volume of the three remaining volumes of 'A Century of English Song' in 2013. Competitors have been asked to select one poem from several written by Marian Lines.

Marian has gathered material, edited and distributed the Newsletter since its inception in 2006. She has served tirelessly on the committee and travelled to support events and sit on judging panels, including in Lincoln with me last year. All this time she has fought a terrific battle with cancer and often felt absolutely drained by the effects of her treatment. Marian and her doctors have decided that her treatment should cease. Marian wishes to remain on the committee for as long as possible but would like to hand over the responsibility for the Newsletter after this issue. I would like to thank her for her

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constant support and on behalf of all our members send her every good wish. I would be most grateful if a member would feel able to come forward and offer to continue to produce the Newsletter for the Association, which at present is published in January and July.

THE COURTNEY KENNY AWARD FINAL 2012

The Final of the Courtney Kenny Award was held in the Recital Room of Tonbridge School this year, as it was in 2010. I am most grateful for the help, on both occasions, of John Marshall, the Facilities Manager, also a musician, who arranged for the school music department to be available to us at no cost. Sadly, John died suddenly at a very young age during the Christmas holiday and the school is not the same without his infectious laugh.

Courtney Kenny was able to be present and Chair the Panel of Judges. He was joined by Doriel Hulse, from the English Department of the school, an expert in theatre and by Richard Suart. Stephen Miles undertook the administrative role, most efficiently as usual, until the event, and I was there to oversee the final itself.

Thanks are due to Betty Roe, Marian Lines and Judy Hildesley who selected six singers for the final at the preliminary round. Much care and thought had gone into the programmes and their 'themes' and the standard of the spoken introductions and the poetry and prose were generally good. It would seem that competitors and their teachers are recognising the value of 'communication' in all aspects of performance that is demanded by the AESS competitions.

The singers had the benefit of much fine accompaniment from some established players. From those eligible, the accompanist's prize was deservedly won by Harry Sever, who played for Olivia Clarke. Olivia, a student of AESS member Eileen Price, was the runner-up and her Shakespeare programme was notable for a strong spoken element, with face and voice combining well in 'They all want to play Hamlet'. Jennie Witton, a student of Susan McCulloch at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama was placed third. Her programme was most effective and included some lesser known pieces by Hogben and Argento as well as an eccentric arrangement of 'The Last Rose of Summer' by Britten. The winner of the 2012 Award was Elizabeth Desbruslais, also from the Guildhall where she is taught by Theresa Goble. Elizabeth gave a wonderful performance of 'Mad Bess' and was fully in command of her audience.

The AESS is most grateful to Courtney Kenny for continuing to sponsor this award and to him and Doriel and Richard for giving their time and expertise at the final. As always, I collated all the remarks from both rounds and passed them on to the entrants. From the grateful responses that I receive from many singers after each competition, it would appear that we are still the only Association which reports back to the performers with points to help them develop their vocal careers.

Graham Trew

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SWINDON: The Opera

As a celebration of the Queen's Jubilee and with the support of the community of Swindon, The Janice Thompson Performance Trust applied for, and won, a grant of £60,000 from The Big Lottery Fund. Matt Fox, JTP Trustee said, "The roof nearly came off the studio when we heard we'd won!"

The winning proposal from the JTP Trust was to create 'Swindon: The Opera', its scope spanning Queen Elizabeth 1st's reign – 1952 – 2012, and telling some of the story of Swindon and its people in those 60 years.

The opera will take the form of a grand 'musical extravaganza for the 21st century' and involving Swindon people from the very young to the very old, with music commissioned from Betty Roe MBE, book and lyrics by Matt Fox. The performance will be produced and directed by Janice Thompson and her team of professional musicians and teachers and involving all the young performing groups in the Trust.

Both Betty and Janice are members of the AESS.

Swindon: The Opera will be performed at **The Steam Museum** on the **7th & 8th of July**, both performances at 2.30.

LINCOLN MINSTER SCHOOL MASTERCLASS AESS Junior Competition Prize 2010

In November 2010 Rosanna Cooper won 1st prize in the Junior Competition, but because the school is very busy the masterclass part of the prize was delayed until April 2012.

So, on Monday April 2nd I went to Lincoln Minster School to give a two hour masterclass to eight students in years 11, 12 and 13 in their brand new Music Hall. I was tremendously impressed by the standard of singing and musicianship and was sorry they could only have 15 minutes each, but there were buses and trains to catch.

Ellie Perry, year 11, sang L'Absence from Berlioz Nuits d'été, quite beautifully, she studies with Margaret Crossland and is a voice to look out for in the future. I was also offered Gluck: O del mio dolce adoro, Dido's lament, Eja Mater from Pergolesi's Stabat Mater, Am Abend, da es kühle war, a baritone recitative from the St. Matthew Passion, and finally Imogen Smalley, year 13, sang Mahler's Lob des hohen Verstands from Des Knaben Wunderhorn, exceptionally well. She also studies with Margaret Crossland.

Their director of music, Mr. Aric Prentice accompanied and supported them all superbly. He said that the AESS competition was quite a challenge for the youngsters because of the spoken and themed requirements, but that it was "very good for them". I hope we see many more students from the school in the future.

Sarah Leonard

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THE PATRICIA ROUTLEDGE SONG PRIZE FINAL

The AESS song prizes are unusual in seaching not only for a fine voice but the ability to present a well chosen, varied programme on a theme, using song, poetry and prose and to communicate it with flair.

Although this year's entry was low in numbers there was certainly no lack of these skills shown at the final..

If **Jon Stainsby** felt any nervousness in being first off the block he certainly didn't show it. He introduced his chosen theme "Wanderers and Night-Wanderers" lucidly, immediately inviting the audience to travel with him through the programme, which was exceptionally well crafted. Vaughan Williams 'The Vagabond' gave us time to relax with something familiar before being introduced to more unusual items by Ives and Matthews. Jon's choice of poems by Wordsworth, Frost and Byron fitted the theme well and he spoke them unaffectedly and with feeling. Of the songs, Barber's "Night Wanderers" with words by the 'Tramp Poet' W. H. Davies, was particularly moving. Rounding the programme off with 'The Tramps' by Bliss was a masterstroke of programming as it brought us full circle, the rhythm somehow recalling the first song of the evening and the words so appropriate to end this recital.

Jon's singing was technically assured but would have benefitted from stronger projection and contrast at times, nevertheless this was an enjoyable recital.

Eleanor Garside's performance. "Of Graves and Spirits" was, for me, a delight from beginning to end. Another audience member described it as the "complete package".

Her unannounced declamation of the 'Song of Simeon' was immediately arresting and we soon found ourselves metaphorically standing at the graveside for 'The Choirmaster's Burial'. This Britten setting of Hardy's words is not my favourite English song but it was beguilingly sung. A Larkin poem led to Vaughan Williams 'The New Ghost', performed with a radiant certainty of the story's outcome. Eleanor added variety to her programme with Dove's unaccompanied 'Full fathom Five'. This required assurance, agility and drama and these qualities were never lacking - a totally convincing rendition. Poems by Shelley and Auden were spoken with feeling and the final song, 'Autumn Evening' by Quilter rounded the recital off with words of solace.

Eleanor's lower notes occasionally lacked focus but otherwise her performance was vocally confident and dramatically convincing. I know one should not mention such things but she also looked lovely and performed with serenity, making an altogether satisfying performance.

Ben McAteer has a fine, powerful voice, a strong technique, and sings with great passion. However I did feel that his programme, "Love and Loss: Our Discordant Life", could have been more adventurous. It left me wondering if he had chosen the songs and poems first and then tried to find a common theme to bind them.

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Ben opened his recital with two of Butterworth's "A Shropshire Lad" settings showing excellent dynamic control and expressive delivery. Yeats was the connection between "The Cloths of Heaven" and Britten's setting of "The Salley Gardens." The latter seemed a little too slow for its folk-song style.

Quilter's "The Faithless Shepherdess" was strongly felt, but "Aspatia's Song" sat awkwardly after it. Gurney's setting of "Lights Out" was the most adventurous choice and then we were quickly back to the tried and tested with "The Lost Chord". I wished Ben had searched for a more varied choice of songs, but having said that, the Sullivan was a magnificent piece in his hands. 'They don't write 'em like that any more!'

By the interval we had all become aware that the programme choices were rather solemn. The two final titles did not foretell a barrel full of laughs.

However **Alexei Winter** lightened things up a little with his theme of "A Moonlit Night". "Autumn Twilight" by Warlock showed that here is a beautiful lyric tenor in the making, but just needing a little more weight and colour at present.

Manley Hopkins is not an easy poet to read but Alexei effectively used the poetic devices and cherished every word of "Moonrise". However I would have preferred a more naturalistic approach in his reading of "Sad Steps" by Larkin which came over as rather mannered. The overall feeling of this programme was again, muted, although the scampering mouse in Armstrong Gibbs' "Silver" enlivened the room for a moment.

This was another carefully crafted programme with songs by Hindemith, Finzi and Jeffreys leading us towards the eventual brightness of dawn as envisaged by Lord Arthur Douglas, and finally Blake and Quilter.

"The Way that they will not return " was **Hadleigh Adams** chosen title, a quote from his second song, Butterworth's "The Lads in their Hundreds". The programme drew mainly on music and words from the last fifty years beginning with Lilburn's declamatory, "Once my Strength was an avalanche". This elegy for diminishing powers was moving and indeed the programme was harrowing in its exploration of illness and death.

It was evident from the beginning that Hadleigh's voice would be equal to any challenge he set for it, with depth and dramatic colour. The programme looked as if it might be too short, until we reached Brass's piece about Walt Whitman and "Heartbeats", a setting of Dixon's words by Musto. This was incredibly dramatic and required stamina and vocal surety from the singer and a deal of technical expertise from the accompanist. I was not surprised the Catherine Norton won the accompanists' prize.

I hope that my fellow audience members and the judges enjoyed this evening of accomplished singing as much as I did.

Patricia Williams

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OBITUARY – NIVEN MILLER

Niven Miller, born in St Monans, Fife, Scotland, was awarded the British Dartington Opera scholarship in 1951. The Sir James Caird Travelling scholarship for Scotland followed, enabling him to study with Fernando Carpi (Conservatoire of Geneva), Eduardo Pedrazzoli (La Scala, Milan), Heinrich Schmidt (Vienna Opera House) and Lucien Muratore (Paris).

Sir Thomas Beecham gave him many principal roles, and he also worked with Glyndebourne and Dublin Opera, as well as The English Opera Group, Edinburgh International Festivals, and oratorio, recitals and concerts all over the UK and Europe.

His annual recital of Scottish songs at the Royal Festival Hall led to a contract with Decca and international recitals. A 3 month tour of New Zealand was sold out and the Australian part of the tour led to an ABC TV series. In South Africa he deputised for Mario Lanza, and the tour culminated in a New York Town Hall recital sponsored by Anna Russell. He continued to perform in concerts all over the US and Canada for many years. A TV series made in Canada, "Niven Miller Sings", was popular in Canada and the US for seven years.

His worldwide radio series, heard in over 33 countries, had over 1 billion listeners. Pan American Radio presented him with the "1972 Asia Peace Prize". He also gave recitals and TV programmes in Moscow, St Petersburg, and the Baltic States.

His last London appearance was a recital at the Royal Albert Hall in 1972. Niven sang at two Royal Command Performances in the grounds of Holyrood Palace, for Her Majesty the Queen. He also made over 20 LP records.

Niven retired from the International scene and had a very busy teaching practice in Ashted, Surrey. His clientele included professionals, beginners, and those recommended by laryngologists and speech therapists for vocal troubles.

He represented the South of England on the Council of Association of Teachers of Singing and was Chair of the Association of English Singers and Speakers for five years. He was then made Honorary President.

Niven suffered a hemiplegic stroke in 2003, and a second in 2005. Despite these setbacks, he was inspirational in always striving to improve every day. He carried on teaching until fairly recently; he enjoyed being able to share his profound knowledge of music, together with his anecdotes and positive thinking.

He fell and broke his hip in December 2011. Sadly he never recovered. He has left a marvellous legacy through all his many pupils, some of whom started their lessons with no voice at all. He shared his love of singing and has changed the lives of many. He leaves his beloved wife of 50 years, Margaret, and their daughter.

SUCCESS of AESS PRIZEWINNERS

Members might like to know that three AESS prizewinners are appearing together in the well- reviewed ENO 'Billy Budd', with Benedict Nelson (Runner-up in 2008) playing Billy. Duncan Rock (3rd in 2008) and Nicky Spence (3rd in 2004) are also in the cast.

Stephen Miles

STOP PRESS

We are delighted that **Richard Suart** has agreed to provide the entertainment before the Centenary Dinner on March 17th 2013.