

AESS SUMMER NEWSLETTER 2007

A NOTE FROM THE CHAIRMAN

Welcome to the summer newsletter. I would like to thank all those, especially Marian Lines, who have contributed to it, assembled it and labelled, stamped and posted it. Much voluntary time is spent by the committee in the background preparing and organising and all members will be pleased that the aims of the Association are in such caring hands. The final of the Patricia Routledge Competition was a case in point with all preliminary round and final adjudicators and organisers working for expenses only. The final (reviewed elsewhere) was of a high standard and whilst I understand that many of our members teach and perform all hours and many do not live near London, it was a great pity that our premier competition was attended by so few. Students from Trinity College, the hosts, and the Guildhall, who provided five of the six finalists and where I had adjudicated the day before, swelled the ranks, plus relatives and supporters of the six finalists but there were only four AESS members present who had no other role in the proceedings.

A flyer is included for the Stephen Varcoe masterclass. Students of AESS members will be the participants, apart from one Guildhall student, as the School is kindly giving the Association free use of the premises. Stephen likes to include the audience in his work and it is sure to be an informative and enlightening afternoon. I hope to be present depending on examination schedules and flights from Glasgow.

I finish by issuing another gentle (!) subscription reminder. Pat Williams, another unpaid volunteer has had to send nearly forty reminders, which uses up time and funds. As yet it is not possible to set up a direct debit system and if standing orders were arranged they would have to be changed when the subscription changed, so we rely on members responding as quickly as possible.

Wishing all members a very happy summer, either working or relaxing. The committee meets again in September so please inform one of them if there is a matter that you would like discussed. Committee names and other details are on the website:

www.aofess.org.uk

As there will not be another newsletter until the winter I would like inform members that one of our Presidents, Dame Cleo Laine will be 80 on the 27th. October. I think the event will not pass by unnoticed!

The Final of the AESS PATRICIA ROUTLEDGE NATIONAL ENGLISH SONG COMPETITION

The Final of the 2007 AESS Song Competition, so generously sponsored by our President Patricia Routledge and hosted by Trinity College of Music, was held in the ample space of the College's Theatre Studio - a welcome contrast to the wet and windy evening outside.

The panel of judges were: Sarah Leonard; Stephanie Turner; Michael Pilkington; James Rutherford and Stephen Varcoe. The evening was organised and conducted by our Chairman, Graham Trew who also presented the prizes. Members of the Trinity staff kindly looked after the six finalists who were:-

Derek Welton – Baritone; Lara Dodds-Eden, Piano. Programme title 'The Road Not Taken', Guildhall.

Rhona McKail – Soprano; Jennie-Helen Moston, Piano. Programme title 'A Woman's Life & Love', Guildhall.

Tanya Cooling – Soprano; Ja Yeon Kang, Piano. Programme title 'Summer Dreams', Guildhall.

Samantha Houston – Mezzo-Soprano; Joel Harder, Piano. Programme title 'Impacts of Love in the 21st Century', Guildhall.

Emily-Jane Thomas – Soprano; Yoko Hirao, Piano. Programme title 'Animals', Guildhall.

Sara Lawson – Soprano; Jonathan Fisher, Piano. Programme title 'To Everything There is a Season', Manchester.

Third Prize went to Sara Lawson with a lively programme including songs by Finzi, Ireland and Moeran.

The Runner-up was Emily-Jane Thomas with an adventurous and sophisticated programme demonstrating her considerable acting ability and subtle musicianship.

The Winner of the 2007 Patricia Routledge English Song Competition was Rhona McKail who sang:

It was a Lover & his Lass – Bush/Shakespeare
 My Life's Delight – Quilter/Campion
 My Heart is like a Singing Bird – Parry/Rossetti
 Do not go my Love – Hageman/Tagore
 Why do I Love? – Gibbs/'Ephelia'
 O Waly, Waly – Britten (arranged)

and spoke the poem:

If – by Kipling

Rhona's was a performance of great warmth, understanding and skill, finely illustrating the range of emotions encompassed by Love, and much appreciated by the audience.

Winner of the Accompanist's Prize was Jonathan Fisher, Manchester. Prizes were presented by Stephen Varcoe.

FUTURE EVENTS

STEPHEN VARCOE MASTERCLASS

Stephen Varcoe is holding a Masterclass in the Recital Hall of The Guildhall School of Music and Drama on Sunday July 1st 2007, from 2.00pm to 6.00pm. All are welcome to attend, and admission is free.

JUNIOR RECITAL PRIZE 2007

Venues are still to be finalised for the prize, but it is hoped that there will be a Northern preliminary round at Chethams School in Manchester and a London preliminary round at Taggs Yard, Barnes on Sunday, November 18th, with the final taking place in London on Sunday, November 25th. Entries will need to be received by Friday, October 26th. Carolyn Richards has kindly agreed to co-ordinate the prize again this year and application forms will be available from her or from the website from July.

It was hoped that the final might move out of London this year but this has proved difficult. Trinity College of Music Junior Department, whose student won the prize last year, are hoping to now stage the final but this has not yet been confirmed.

Monies raised to sponsor the Junior Recital Prize from the Thomas Hampson Masterclass will soon be exhausted. Any sponsorship offers or ideas are welcome.

Coral Gould has generously offered to fund an annual third prize of £100 and we have a £50 donation to be used for an accompanist's prize if the judges feel that they would like to make an award. This is not listed as a prize as it is a one-off amount at present.

If any individual or company would like to sponsor the second prize of £200 or the first prize of £300 for one year or for a period, please make contact.

HOW IT ALL BEGAN Two AESS members recall how their musical lives started

SETTING MUSIC TO WORDS –

by Betty Roe

I was surprised and somewhat in awe when Marian Lines suggested I might write down some thoughts on how I “set words to music”, or in my case, how I “set music to words”. Before I try to do so, I must confess that I’ve not ever considered myself to be a fluent enough wordsmith to write about anything at all. However, the idea tickled my fancy, and soon enough something surfaced, making me conscious of how I do what I do.

Before I embark on the nitty-gritty, I need to give you a bit of background which will help you understand why, a large part of the time, I “allow” things to happen. I was blessed from birth with a fine pair of sharp ears. While there may not be a lot going on between them, they have led me to create a stream of song settings without a great deal of effort for more than 60 years. I haven’t had to think about how to do them, and now I find myself put on the spot and I find I have strong feelings about the way it should be done.

I had the good fortune to spend the war years as a Junior Exhibitioner at the RAM. Once a week we had a theory class, short but productive, on which I thrived. From a very early

age and before any music lessons, I was able to pick up tunes and play the piano by ear, and have fun with popular classics and popular songs of the day - when permitted - because “playing by ear” was not acceptable. But the harmony classes welcomed this ability, although perhaps not the repertoire – (eg: the opening of Mozart’s famous Sonata in C with the L.H in C#) – and later, as a senior student, Professors encouraged me with the words “Trust your Ear”. Much later, when in my 30s, I was able to have a few lessons in composition from Lennox Berkley who concentrated on my writing instrumental music, never at any time wanting me to change the songs, always enthusing. “Follow your instincts” said he, so I did, and I still do.

In the late 40s and early 50s I was lucky enough to meet, and work with a writer who was producing topical, witty lyrics to go into the popular entertainment of that time – Intimate Revue. I composed in a way that would allow the lyrics to have their natural rise and fall, peak-points and let-downs, making towards a carefully timed punch line. We were alongside Flanders & Swann at that time, our numbers went into Summer Shows, end-of-the-pier revues and such. Alongside, I was playing the organ regularly on Sundays where extemporising was the mainstay of the music – filling the gaps. The timing of the sentiments were similar to the revue requirements, and I can still thrill at being able to time that final, perfect cadence and resolution just at the point when the Vicar, having finished the washing-up, places the cloth over the chalice... Mmmmm! All of this experience must have made me very alert to effective timing with the natural rhythm of the words.

So – here goes: I am normally writing to meet a commission and must satisfy the customer, usually by identifying which piece of mine they have heard and liked, so I can compose in a similar style. I encourage them – when appropriate – to have the words specially written., preferably by my regular writing partner. Otherwise I suggest I set a poem of their choice. Once we have settled on the words, the forces – eg. Song with piano and/or other instrument(s) – I settle to read the poem with a pencil in my hand, and usually can jot down a rough rhythmic sketch straight away. I read the poem many times, hoping I thoroughly understand it - 98% I do. Occasionally I can be in some doubt, but whatever the end product I will have good reason for it. Usually the first rhythmic sketch I make will be The One. I start at the keyboard and let my fingers free to roam. The rhythm inevitably leads to the melody – which comes with a harmony – so I have the material and am ready to cut the cloth. Following the natural word emphasis, we know nothing is black or white. I recently had to set the poem “Sea Fever” which turned out to be an interesting exercise, already knowing the Ireland setting. Immediately my opening emphasis was different from his which is “I must go down to the seas again” with the emphasis on “I” rather than anybody else. My shaping is “I must go down to the seas again” – reason? because I have clearly been there before. So each of us will have our own ideas, what we must have is a reason for our decision. Punctuation must be noted and considered. Remember our old favourite, “Slowly, silently, now the moon,” - “NOW THE MOON” what? I cry... After many years somebody has removed the comma so at last the moon will walk the night:

“Slowly, silently, now the moon
Walks the night...”

Another famous one:

“So fold my dearest thou and slip”

then a long gap

“into my bosom...” Even famous 20th Century English song writers had their problems.

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For me, the piano writing is all important, for the song is only valid when the music enhances the words. The vocal melodic line must preside. So I hope to avoid doubling the tune in the right hand, this means the singer can hear themselves in an uncluttered situation – so no hand-holding. In the case of writing for small children this is important and means that the singer has to know the melody very well indeed. As an examiner and adjudicator, my heart has gone out to the little mite singing her/his heart out to a hefty right hand playing the melody in the same octave as the voice – by a loving parent or well meaning teacher – thus making the child inaudible. If it is necessary to play the tune, put it an octave higher. Whilst on this subject, when choosing solo songs for small people, avoid songs set “for unison voices”! A solo song is something different...

This article is getting too lengthy, so I will put the simple remainder in a nutshell. Whatever the choice of accompaniment, it must support the singer without clutter, allowing room for the natural word emphasis to preside. It can develop the musical idea - or not, as it befits – and endorse and predict what the singer has said and will say, and complement their personal interpretation within the musical framework. Also it can act as a reminder to the listener, (BR examples “I Know a Bank where the Wild Thyme Blows” and “The Music Tree”). I hope I bear out most of the above! All in all, setting music to words is a pure joy to me and a task from which I will never tire or retire.

CREATING PROGRAMMES

By Patricia Williams

It was the threepenny bar of chocolate that did it. At primary school there was a weekly quiz during hymn practice to see who knew the meanings of the most words. The prize was a threepenny bar of chocolate! Each week I would be searching the dictionary for those elusive meanings - celestial, ethereal, diadem, panoply, eternal. - all to satisfy my cupboard love! Is it surprising that in Graham Johnson’s AESS English song masterclass last year, when he asked the audience if anyone knew what a “glebe-cow” was, my hand shot up involuntarily?

My love of words and music goes back even farther. I always loved singing. Learning the piano at the age of six I insisted on singing the verse that appeared with a picture beside each piece in the book, even though it didn’t fit the music. I’ve been able to accompany myself at the piano ever since.

While studying piano-accompanying at the Guildhall, a chance one-off concert presenting Victorian songs and poetry with a vocal quartet led to a series of similar concerts with well-known actors. From them I learnt a great deal about performing poetry and programme building. I also accompanied song recitals and amassed a knowledge of repertoire from them, and from the eclectic group of students in the Adult Education singing classes which I ran to keep body and soul together.

My vocal quartet reinvented itself as the trio “Music and Sweet Poetry”. I relished creating the programmes - “Gardener’s Delight “ “An Early Christmas Box”, “Birds, Beasts and Butterflies”, each title offering endless opportunities to research music to complement the poetry. With “The Food of Love” I discovered a talent, for song-writing. A gap in the programme needed humour and I thought I might write something appropriate. The first words came to me in the small hours, in bed. “My Knickerbocker Glory - isn’t - glorious - - anymore” And the song materialised during the night.

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Another lucky chance led to me “going solo”. I was booked to accompany a recital but the baritone lost his voice. To avoid turning the audience away, we somehow concocted a series of readings, piano music and songs which I could sing from the piano. Someone in the audience who ran a music club invited me to perform a similar programme and my first one-woman show, “Commuter Blues” was born. These hybrid programmes are, perhaps, unusual fare but they offer such variety that there really is something for almost everyone.

Although by training I am firstly a musician, and much of my work is singing, playing and conducting, I am passionate about words. Audience members have commented that, before seeing a show, they had thought of poetry as the “dry as dust” stuff drummed into them at school. It was quite a thrill for me to be told “You’ve changed my point of view!”

TO NEW MEMBERS

We would very much like new AESS members to tell us something about themselves for our Winter Newsletter, saying – in up to 250 words – what inspired them to come into the arts, be it the sung word or the spoken word. Contributions can be sent to Marian Lines at: malines@liloni.fsnet.co.uk or to 101A Cambridge Gdns, London W10 6JE.

