



The Association of English Singers & Speakers

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AESS SUMMER NEWSLETTER 2009

A NOTE FROM THE CHAIRMAN

It is with great pleasure that I am able to inform you that Courtney Kenny, pianist, repetiteur, musical director and renowned interpreter of the words and music of Noel Coward, has generously offered to give £2500 annually, initially until 2013, to fund an AESS 'intermediate' song competition.

Courtney Kenny studied at the Royal College of Music and began his career as an operatic coach. I worked with him in Wexford and remember especially his wonderful late-night cabaret performances. He has always had a love of English Song and wishes to help students who are at the beginning of their university career. By adjusting the age ranges of our two present competitions, we will be able to include a third, and it is hoped that the first competition for the prize will be in February/March 2010.

The final of the Patricia Routledge competition, reviewed in this newsletter, was of an exceptionally high standard. The prizewinners all impressed with their interpretations of song and poetry and any of the first three would have been a worthy winner. Miss Routledge was present to award the prizes and there was a large, enthusiastic audience. The Guildhall hosted the event most efficiently and Stephen Miles was our exemplary co-ordinator, to whom many, many thanks.

I have just returned from the Birmingham Junior Conservatoire, where I gave a masterclass. Ten students sang English songs, including the winner of the 2007 Catherine Lambert Prize, Harriet Eyley. The visit was in accordance with the rules of the competition, which offers a class to the winner's place of study. The standard of singing was high and all the students had obviously considered both words and music in their performance. A further masterclass is yet to be arranged at St Paul's Girls' School as part

of the 2008 prize. These classes and the provision of 'feedback' from the judges for all the performers in our competitions is a very important aspect of our work.

The membership of the Association continues to grow. Please encourage those whom you know would be in sympathy with our aims, to join. We aim for 200 members by Christmas, only a ten percent increase.

Our recent competition winner, John McMunn, gave a recital at the AOTOS conference in July and I tried to recruit more members at this event, where I spoke. (Review later in Newsletter)

Thank you all who gift-aid your subscriptions. Sue Field, our Honorary Treasurer, completed the long-winded task of reclaiming tax for past years recently and this has increased our funds by £1200.

It was good to see fifty members and their guests at the AGM and Dinner. Patricia Routledge spoke eloquently and entertainment came from the girls of St Paul's School. The Royal Overseas League is a fine venue for all our needs on that day and it has been booked again for March, 2010. However, the ROL now makes it a rule that there needs to be a minimum of 50 diners in order to avoid paying for the room, so I hope that you will consider coming and joining in our one opportunity in the year to meet socially.

THE PATRICIA ROUTLEDGE ENGLISH SONG COMPETITION FINAL 2009

AESS events are always interesting. There is the chance to catch up with colleagues from thirty years ago (if, like me, you are that old), meet new members and sometimes run into old friends one hasn't seen for an age. And then there is the business of the evening.....

In this case it was the final of the 2009 competition. Reports of the preliminary rounds suggested that the standard would be high and we were not disappointed. In addition, audience and performers alike were delighted that Patricia Routledge, our generous sponsor, was able to be there herself to present the prizes.

Unlike most other competitions ours requires entrants to both sing and speak to their audience, and examines not just that ability but the whole performance, from programme building to the actual performance. It can be a minefield. What theme to choose? How to research the programme? What to wear - formal or informal? How to present the items without being indistinct and without sounding like an EL-OC-U-TION demonstration! The finalists managed most of these tasks very well.

DANAE ELENI had the nerve-wracking task of starting the evening. In "Islands and Sirens" she presented the most wide-ranging programme historically, ranging from Purcell's "Fairest Isle" to the contemporary "Adria" by Guy Newbury, who was also her supportive accompanist. Her songs were skillfully selected to allow contrasts, from the impassive "Motion and Stillness" of Vaughan-Williams to the lively "Mermaid's Song" by Haydn and Britten's descriptive "Seascape". Her spoken piece, "Siren Song" by Atwood was very effective and, incidentally, her flowing bronze dress was subtly suited to her theme. "Adria" was a dramatic finale and Danae was well able to cope with its technical and musical demands.

JOHN McMUNN's "Songs whose Beauty now only lives in Memory", using American songs was intended to show us, so we were told, what it is to be American. I did, therefore find his choice of a quintessentially English poem, "Bredon Hill" rather an anomaly and I felt his speaking of it was a little mannered. However, there were some treats in his singing. The Ives songs were familiar and hinted at a comedic talent in store for later. Both the beautiful "April Rain" by Duke and "I will always love you" by Rorem were touchingly performed, with the voice warming up to a greater freedom. Two cabaret songs by Bolcom, "Black Max" and "George" finished the recital. Sung with a consummate sense of style and suitably tragi-comic effects, and ably accompanied by Gary Matthewman, these were superb.

JENNY BACON accompanied by Craig White, explored the work of "The Sitwell Siblings" and built her programme around Walton's Three Songs of Edith Sitwell. Particularly impressive for me was her memorised prose reading of an extract from Osbert Sitwell's "Those were the days" characterising Peter Warlock, a clever choice which then led us into a Warlock Song, "The Fox". This is a demanding song and the three Walton songs also have their challenges. On this occasion I would have liked more distracted lyricism in "Daphne" and ironic languor in "Through Gilded Trellises." Both felt a little effortful. However, "Old Sir Faulk" was carried off with aplomb to finish the programme.

MARCUS FARNSWORTH, from the moment he stepped onto the stage, seemed at ease with himself and his audience. For me he lived both songs and readings as if the incidents described were happening at that moment. Finzi's "The Phantom" was an arresting beginning, and "The Apparition" by Donne continued the theme of lost love. Vaughan Williams's "The New Ghost" and Britten's "The Tyger" showed the range of Marcus's expressive skills, and these were mirrored by his excellent accompanist, Elizabeth Burgess, throughout. "Ghosts" by Bridges and "The Choirmaster's Burial" by Hardy brought spirits to life again in speech. The final "Is My Team Ploughing" of Butterworth, with its perfectly controlled mezza voce questions and increasingly uncomfortable answers, held the audience spellbound for some seconds after the last note died away. "Spirits from this world and the next" was indeed a convincing programme, superbly delivered.

KATE SYMONDS-JOY proved herself not only an accomplished singer but also an excellent comic actress in her programme of "Cautionary Tales for the Nice and Naughtly." She was ably accompanied by Susie Summers. "Advice To Young Children" by Stevie Smith set the tone for the recital, which included much to amuse. Belloc's poem "Matilda" was complemented by settings of "Jim" by Lehmann and "The Birds" by Britten, the last proving that Belloc did sometimes write in a more serious vein. The inclusion of Belloc's own unaccompanied version of Tarantella, delivered with lightning-quick diction, made an unusual addition to the whole. Songs by Stravinsky, Ireland, Warlock and Gatty completed the ingenious programme and many of the items had the audience chuckling in their seats and for some time afterwards.

As you can see, it was a treat of an evening. My comments on the programmes are, of course, just one point of view but hopefully will show those who could not attend what

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they have missed. As for the results, no doubt these will be formally announced elsewhere in this newsletter. Whom did I choose? Well, in the words of one of our great English performers, for the three prizes I chose “all the right people but not necessarily in the right order.”

The Winners were:

1st John McMunn
2nd Marcus Farnsworth
3rd Kate Symonds-Joy

Accompanists Prize was won by: Craig White

Patricia Williams

A NOTABLE AFTER-DINNER SPEAKER

Following a very successful AGM, close-harmony entertainment, convivial drinks and dinner, we were lucky enough to be addressed by President Patricia Routledge... well, less addressed than treated to a talk that was funny (*hors-d'oeuvres* - a definitive rendering of ‘I Went to a Marvellous Party’), insightful (*main course* - a witty take on the ageing process) and for ‘*afters*’, an impassioned plea for attention to be given to spoken English.

Those of us who were brought up in the tradition of memorising poetry, prose, dialogue as well as song, know the great value of having a store-cupboard of language to call upon in performance and teaching, so it was good to be reminded that our Association should encourage speakers as well as singers. How this is to be done will need to be seriously considered in the months ahead.

ML

A COORDINATOR’S LAMENT

“I’m sorry but...”

Unaccustomed as I was to coordinating song competitions I feel I am now an old hand, having just completed my second term dealing with the administrative minutiae of the Patricia Routledge National English Song Competition. This was the first year of the generously increased prize money and initially there were a goodly number of applications. The key to a trouble free time for the coordinator is if the entrants read thoroughly the conditions of entry before they post their application form. This year the prize winner was committed to perform at the AOTOS Conference and some fell at the first fence. One or two competitors let slip that they weren't available if they were to win but still wanted to compete because they were sure that 'I won't get through to the final'. I hate to think I was a jobsworth but rules is rules.

How to draw up a schedule

First ask your competitors to state which day of the prelims they would prefer. Draw up the resulting schedule from the information provided, send by email and stand back. Little by little you discover that a) 'I'm sorry but I thought the times would be afternoon and evening'; b) 'I'm sorry but my pianist is a church organist and can't make anytime before 1.30pm'; c) 'I'm sorry but although I said I was free my pianist is in Timbuktu that Sunday so can I swap days?' Last year one of the preliminary days fell on a Bank Holiday and everyone applied for the other one. It took a directive that a song would be dropped from each recital to get half the singers to change in order to have a balance to the two days of prelims. The adjudicators are kind folk with huge experience and they should be an important factor in the drawing up of schedules. Luckily they are patient when I give them yet another version of the day's events.

Deep Breathing helps

Gradually the days' schedules take shape but they shift from earlier in the day until you wonder if the adjudicators will have to take hot water bottles and some Horlicks. Little by little the perfect timings of two or three singers and a break followed by two more entrants become a block of four singers, a thirty-five minute lunch and a dash to 4.30pm. The judges understandingly agree to bring sandwiches and a flask.

More deep Breathing

Now for the final. A piece of cake you would think. It is important to get a good flowing concert and there is a lot of work to be done on the programme. Then the phone rings and you find that 'My pianist has a rehearsal in Cornwall the next day and I need to go on early so that he can leave', 'That 's not my pianist's name. I should have told you I got someone else to play for me', ' My pianist has a recital beforehand and cannot make it until such and such a time. I need to go on last'.

Have a lie down

At last, the final is in sight and all goes swimmingly. The winners are announced and we can all go home. Thanks are extended to the judges and yours truly. Here's to the next time and another game of fitting square pegs into round holes.

They tell me there is a third intermediate competition to arrange. Any offers?

Stephen Miles

It was fitting that AESS should be well represented at an event entitled “English as she is Sung” and such was the headline of this the 34th Annual Conference of the Association of Teachers of Singing.

Liza Hobbs, this year’s AOTOS chairman, had invited **Graham Trew** to open the proceedings and he did so in inimitable style. “I have been asked to talk” he quipped, “about ‘Songs Boys Like to Sing’. It will be a short lecture.” (General hilarity at this). He then regaled us with useful ideas on how to choose songs for developing voices, with particular care for range and vocal placing, while keeping the students interested. Much of the suggested repertoire was from Musical Theatre but there were also some classical and pop items, all ably demonstrated by two of his students. The audience’s eagerness to collect copies of the reference sheet Graham had provided was testimony to the interest generated.

John McMunn, winner of the 2009 Patricia Routledge/AESS Recital Prize, was a persuasive advocate for American Composers, ably accompanied by Gary Matthewman. John gave us a programme of songs by Ives, Rorem, Bernstein among others and proved himself to be a real communicator. Although some of the songs were familiar there were some hidden gems here, in particular “April Rain” by Duke and, in cabaret style “Black Max” and “George” by Bolcom.

The next day promised an interesting lecture on “Symbols and Metaphors in Folk and Art Songs” given by Elisabeth Bengtson-Opitz. However it was a “funny sort of day” and by 10.00 a.m. one of the singers who was to illustrate the lecture had fallen ill. By lunchtime a second singer had succumbed to a malady at which point **Sarah Leonard** kindly stepped in to save the day at a few moments notice, virtually sight-reading songs as if she had known them all her life.

Courtney Kenny, who has generously pledged money for a further AESS competition, also stepped into a breach created by Paul Deegan’s absence, with a fascinating programme celebrating the life and music of Percy French. Although we might not think of knowing many of this composer’s songs, hearing “The Mountains of Morne” or “Phil the Fluter’s ball” soon disproves that impression.

Early in the weekend Purcell was the subject of a fascinating talk given by Geraint Lewis, and Purcell ended the conference in the form of a workshop given by Hazel Wood and **Michael Pilkington** with students from Birkbeck College. It was a pity that there wasn’t more time for Michael to discuss the time relationships in Purcell’s extended recitative songs, but we just had a glimpse of how these could work.

However by the end of the conference we did wonder how, in forty-eight hours, we had fitted in all of the above as well as lectures on Comic Songs, (George Hall) Sondheim, (Prof. Nigel Simeone) Articulation and Resonance in Speech, (David Carey and Rebecca Clark Carey) Anti-ageing for the Voice, (Elisabeth Bengtson-Opitz), Healthy Voice Use, (Linda Hutchinson) and “From the English Song Shelf”, (Gordon Stewart.) A feast of information, indeed.

Patricia Williams

'The Frostbound Wood'

British songs by Warlock, Howells, Howard and Roe

Tim Travers-Brown – Counter-tenor Jeremy Filsell – Piano

Signum Classics SIGCD 161

In the far off days of the LP, one only had to plan a recital lasting around fifty minutes and, having two sides, each half could have a rise and fall, knowing that the listener was unlikely to get up and take the recording off before it reached the end of the side. CD's can last for up to eighty minutes and the listener now tends to select tracks and sometimes, as I know, never ever listens to the complete CD. The art of listening has been taken away by the pace of life and the 'soundbite'. Vocal recordings suffer from this syndrome. Songs are short and the remote control encourages the listener to be selective. On the other hand, listening to a single voice for the total length of the recording, without the benefit of seeing the performer, and indeed, having the space and atmosphere of the live recital, can cause a loss of interest.

Tim Travers-Brown's recording of British songs has many positive aspects. The programme is unusual, the singing is assured as is the intonation; the piano accompaniments are sympathetic and the balance between the artists is good. Travers-Brown's diction is impeccable. There is absolutely no need to follow the well-produced booklet and he sings with a fine legato line and with good breath control.

One less positive aspect is a tendency for the voice to be rather indulgent with the vowel sounds and in several slow songs, 'Take o take those lips away' for example, initial notes of phrases grow into the sound rather than having a more defined attack. This can have the effect of making some of these C20th 'Art Songs' appear less 'classical' in style. Another is that there is a preponderance of slow songs in the recital. Colour and variety would have been heightened with a better balance between slower and faster pieces.

Betty Roe's 'Noble Numbers', written for five named counter-tenors, has always been part of that voice's core repertoire since being composed in 1972. Tim Travers-Brown performs them with individuality and style and the songs, as a set, provide variety and opportunity for vocal acting, which the singer manages well. The two sets of Michael Howard songs are a fine discovery and well worth the attention of other singers. I especially liked the first group 'The Painted Rose' which shows sensitive word setting. The three songs by Howells do not compare with his finest settings and lacked interest for me. The eleven Warlock songs were, with the reservations made above, thoughtful and well sung. I seem to remember that the upper note on 'little' in the setting of 'Sleep' was only intended for a version with string accompaniment and not the solo setting. Reference to Michael Pilkington's edition would give an answer.

'The Frostbound Wood' is a CD well worth considering, introducing the listener to some neglected songs and offering a fine performance of AESS member, Betty Roe's excellent cycle. Signum Records are to be congratulated on their support of the British song repertoire with this issue and so are the performers.

Graham Trew

UNSUNG HEROES

Following the success of the Betty Roe Concert last September, the AESS committee has conceived the idea of a series of events celebrating composers and poets who are unjustly neglected.

The first of these will take place at Budworth Hall, Ongar on the afternoon of Sunday February 7th 2010 and will feature songs by **Cecil Armstrong Gibbs** and the poetry of **Walter de La Mare** with whom he had a close artistic relationship. On this occasion we will be collaborating with the Armstrong Gibbs Society and the Lea Valley ISM Centre.

Angela Aries, biographer of Armstrong Gibbs has kindly agreed to talk about his life and it is hoped that AESS and ISM members and /or their advanced students will offer to sing or read items in an afternoon concert.

For further information or to offer items for the concert please email Patricia Williams at williams.typhnigerror@tiscali.co.uk.