

The most enjoyable aspect of taking part in the Courtney Kenny Award Competition, for me, was creating a programme that would capture the imagination of my audience. The competitors' recitals were to be no more than twenty minutes in length and, with a theme, had to comprise both English Song and Prose. It was my first competition and, furthermore, I had never put together a themed recital before, but I soon learnt that the deployment of theme can be the difference between an enjoyable programme and a truly inspiring one, so I would like to share some of my thoughts on the matter.

When asked what is needed to make a successful programme, I would answer that there are three basic components. The first is that the programme should be suitably varied in some but not necessarily all aspects such as tempo, key, mood, style and period. By implication, the term 'varied', should also make for a programme that is 'balanced' in the same aspects. The second component is that the audience is taken on a journey, whether that is a psychological journey where the listener is guided through various emotional states or a more literal journey where the progression is musical or stylistic. The third component, and the one which is perhaps the most problematic, is the presence of a theme, and it is the creation, rather than the imposition, of that theme, that a programme can be both compelling and inspiring.

Of course, a theme is not always necessary, and it can often prove to be restrictive, but when the presence of a theme is required, it is important that it is a help rather than a hindrance; it must develop *naturally* from the ideas within the music and the poetry of your programme. If the process is organic, a theme can be the magic thread that ties the items together and breathes life into the drama, but if it is forced, it can create a barrier that limits the emotional and dramatic development of the performance.

The difference between a forced and an organic theme is really a matter of credibility. If one groups together a collection of songs and poems and tries to find the most obvious theme, it will most likely be a vague one, whilst the reverse process of finding material that links in with a preconceived theme will have a contrived result. A theme that is vague or contrived simply isn't believable and has little to say, which defeats the very point of having one. I came to realise this in the early stages of constructing my programme for the Courtney Kenny Award Competition. I tried both these methods and found that I was neither excited nor inspired by my own programme, so there was little hope that my audience would be.

I decided to stop thinking of a theme as a single one dimensional idea that dictated my programme and instead considered that it could be a wider concept that supported the sentiments of the poetry. I wrote down all the pieces of English song and prose that I was already familiar with and, instead of searching for a theme like 'Love' or 'Dreams', I searched for similar morals or sentiments within them, and I found that there was a poetic and emotional link between the seasons and the state of mind of the narrator. I began to see that it is no coincidence that the adoration and contentment of 'Silent Noon' is set on a warm summer's day, or that the wilting flowers in 'The Last Rose of Summer' symbolise lost love, or that "the voice of the winter" in 'Sleep Now' is the mental torment of the person longing for sleep, or death. Not only was this realisation a very true observation that spoke to me, it

also had dramatic potential to create a programme with genuine direction. There were of course holes that I had to fill, but it was a lot easier to find items to complete my programme when I knew exactly the message I wanted to convey.

Once I had created 'Love and the Seasons', it would have been impossible for me to change the order without it losing all sense. It began with 'My Love is Mine', an unaccompanied song by Jonathon Dove with gentle folk-like meanderings indicative of youth and words that conjure images of spring time. The young love progressed through Shakespeare's poem 'Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's day' and grew into fruition during 'Silent Noon.' A sense of loss followed in Britten's 'The Last Rose of Summer', only to lead into the utter degradation of 'Havisham' by Carol Ann Duffy and finally, in the winter of her life, her resolve to find peace in 'Sleep Now'. The absence of one item or the inversion of a poem and song would have compromised the meaning.

To have performed a programme that I really believed in was fulfilling enough, but to be awarded First Prize was an honour, and it was a pleasure simply to know that the judges had connected with my programme as much as I had hoped. My advice to applicants in 2017 is to be thoughtful, imaginative and honest with yourself when constructing your programme. Don't cut corners or compromise what you're trying to say, because it will be the sincerity with which you deliver your programme that will count, so make sure you believe in it!

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