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Seven Ages: Mark Padmore, Roderick Williams, Julius Drake, Victoria Newlyn at Temple Music



Seven Ages - Schubert, Schumann,  
Brahms, Fauré, Poulenc, Vaughan  
Williams, Bridge, Clarke, Butterworth,  
Gurney, Ives, Barber, Copland, Purcell

Mark Padmore, Roderick Williams,  
Victoria Newlyn, Julius Drake

Temple Music at Middle Temple Hall

Reviewed by Robert Hugill on 21 July  
2021 Star rating: 5.0 (\*\*\*\*\*)

The seven ages of man bring Temple  
Music's season to a magical close with a  
wide-ranging recital

The final concert in Temple Music's season on Wednesday 21 July 2021 represented a return to Middle Temple Hall with a live audience for a recital themed on the Seven Ages of Man by tenor Mark Padmore, baritone Roderick Williams and pianist Julius Drake with reader Victoria Newlyn. The programme made no explicit reference to our current situation, yet the way the music and readings reflected on the human experience from Shakespeare's mewling and puking infant right through that haunting image of 'Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything', made you reflect. The programme played without breaks for applause, allowing the sequence of words and music to unfold with some intriguing inclusions and thoughtful juxtapositions, with composers ranging from Schubert, Schumann and Brahms, to Fauré and Poulenc, to RVW, Bridge, Butterworth, and Britten, to Ives, Barber and Copland, ending with Purcell's *Evening Hymn*.

We began, of course, with Jacques' speech from Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, leading to RVW's Blake setting *Infant Joy* the sheer sparseness of having the oboe part played on the piano moved the focus onto Mark Padmore's voice with its variety of colours and his emphasis on text. From wonder we moved to the intimacy of Roderick Williams' story telling in Schubert's *Der Vater mit dem Kind*, the not quite rocking motion in the piano linking to another Blake setting, Rebecca Clarke's *Cradle Song* (sung by Padmore), lyrical yet with twists to the harmony reflecting the twists in the words. Williams' appealing account of Copland's *Little Horses* brought out the folk-ish elements to the song. These were linked by words from the comedy of Thom Gunn's *Baby Song* and A A Milne's *The End* to the more serious from Don Paterson and Carol Ann Duffy.

The whining schoolboy began with Padmore in miraculous form in Britten's *Midnight on the Great Western* (from *Winter Words*), vividly done with the metaphysical element in the second half of the song really lifting us elsewhere, and Padmore followed this with the wonderfully vivid Soutar setting, *A Black Day* from Britten's *Who are these children?* Readings include Paul Henry on a boy's transformation at the barber and Emily Dickinson. And this group ended, rather surprisingly, with Schubert's *Der Pilgrim*, with the journeying of the piano rhythms counterpointed by Williams' confiding tone which really grabbed you leading to the mystical end (to childhood?), which was counterpointed by an enormously thoughtful Cecil Day Lewis reading of a mother remembering her son's first football match.

Schubert's glorious Goethe setting, *Willkommen und Abschied* launched the lover, both Padmore and Drake urgent and vivid, always pressing on to that moment of passion. Schumann's *Widmung* came next, beautifully shaped by Williams yet with a sense from both him and Drake that the poet is so carried away he can't stop. Padmore's account of Fauré's *Donc ce sera par un clair jour d'été* created another outpouring of lyrical intensity counterpointed with a complex harmonic web in the piano, and we ended insouciantly with RVW's *It was a lover and his lass* sung by both Padmore and Williams.

The second half began with the prologue from Shakespeare's *Henry V*, 'All the world's a stage', vividly launching the soldier, yet counterpointed by intense poignancy of Butterworth's *Lads in their Hundreds* and Ives' haunting *Tom Sails Away*, with Williams frank and approachable in the first whilst the second seemed as if he really was remembering the event of his brother going to war. We ended this group with Poulenc's *Bleuet*, sweetly disturbing with Padmore bringing an edge to the lyricism. Readings moved from a striking piece of WB Yeats to Chidiok Tichborne's rather grim *Elegy*.

The justice began, intriguingly with Padmore Fauré's *Prison*, a lovely fluid and intense setting of Verlaine (which the poet wrote in prison hence the song's name), then Williams as RVW's sophisticated yet swaggering Vagabond, frankly confiding and mesmerising. Schumann's duet *Herbslied* and Brahms' darkly serious *Mit vierzig Jahren*, from Williams, brought another aspect to the group of songs whilst Britten's setting of WH Auden, *As it is, Plenty* from *On This Island* was more pointed with cabaret-ish hints. Readings here moved from Cavafy's intriguing *Ithaka* to the funny, wise and touching *On his Baldness* by Po Chu-i!

For the sixth age, the slippered pantaloone, we returned to Brahms, with another duet *Phänomen*, about a spry old man loving which contrasted with the sad end of Barber's *Bessie Bobtail*, beautifully rendered by Padmore. For readings we had Gwendolyn Brooks and further Cavafy.

The final age began with Frank Bridge's *Journey's End*, a haunting question and answer between father and son which was both terrific and ultimately unnerving, why don't we know the song better! Then a short but pointed reading of Raymond Carver and finally Purcell's *An Evening Hymn* (in Britten's realisation, I think) sung by both singers, at first alternim and then together in the Alleluias. Completely magical.

The evening brought an intriguing contrast in approach from the two singers, each giving their own personality and yet the whole creating a striking synthesis which worked well as a journey through life. Victoria Newlyn brought an element of drama to each of the readings, creating vivid vignettes which seemed often to arise out of the song. Julius Drake, as ever, made a sympathetic partner and guide on the journey, deftly moving between styles and providing a further characterful voice.