

Seven Ages: a magical and consoling journey through life's hopes, fears and humility

A review by Claire Seymour

I hate to fall back on cliché, but this really was a 'dream-team' recital at Middle Temple Hall, in which tenor Mark Padmore, baritone Roderick Williams and pianist Julius Drake took us on a musical journey through life, complemented by literary readings narrated by actress and director Victoria Newlyn. From Shakespeare's 'infant,/ Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms', we travelled through the trials of youth, adolescence and adulthood – discovery and



and fear, love and war, loss and regret – arriving at the quietude and wistfulness of old age. The journey closed with Raymond Carver's contemplative assessment of man's hopes and struggles – a poignant fragment of a whole life – and the twilight resignation and peace of Purcell's evening hymn.

Too often during the past eighteen months have we been reminded that 'all the men and women merely players' with the 'exits and their entrances'. But, this recital made us reflect on the full gamut of our experiences and aspirations, fulfilled and denied, and on our relationships with others and with the natural world. Pain was inseparable from knowledge, sadness from growth, darkness from humour.

The music selected to represent the seven stages of man's journey encompassed the anticipated and the rare. So, infancy placed Vaughan Williams' 'Infant Joy' – sung with delicate reverence by Padmore, supported by Drake's fragile but exquisite tracteries – alongside Schubert's 'Der Vater mit dem Kind', in which Williams' beautiful baritone touchingly communicated the poem's intimations of loss and Drake's expressive insight made the tiny, repetitive rocking an emblem of inarticulate innocence. But, the sequence also incorporated the less well-known 'Cradle Song' by Rebecca Clarke – the seeming placidity of which was revealed as illusory by the urgent, anxious inflection of Padmore's floating appeals, 'Sleep!' – and Copland's 'The little horses', a lullaby from the American South, enlivened by onomatopoeic rhythms and surges, and a lovely lagging piano part at the close, mimicking the child's drifting into the world of dreams.

Wandering guilelessly into childhood, we discovered the loneliness of a child who is travelling in a third-class railway carriage, to an unknown destination, in Britten's setting of Hardy, 'Midnight on the Great Western' (Winter Words). Padmore powerfully conveyed the compassion and concern of the adult narrator reflecting retrospectively on the child's experience, while the immediacy of the piano communicated the temporal disjunct and emotional contrast between the perceptions of the adult and the

experience of the child. Drake's creation of accumulating motion and reverberation was superb, and I don't think I've ever been so chilled by the piano's 'whistle', fading away but resonating across the countryside, and symbolising the 'world unknown' towards which the journeying boy is travelling. An esteemed interpreter of Britten, Padmore also shared the wry indignation of the unfortunate, oft-beaten child in 'Black Day' (from *Who are these children?*) and – later, at the close of the fifth stage of life in which man plays the role of a justice – the satirical scepticism of Auden's 'As it is, plenty' (the last song of *On This Island*). In the latter, the taut dotted rhythms and insistent tone of the vocal line, together with the jazzy pertness of Drake's accompaniment, tellingly revealed the cheap falsities that the song ironically embodies.

Childhood also brings idealistic hopes and dreams, as one sets forth on a springtime journey only to encounter inevitable disillusionment; both emotions were persuasively communicated by Williams in Schubert's 'Der Pilgrim'. The piano's harmonic progressions suggested the path would unfold smoothly, without complication, and the momentum was flowing, but life's obstacles – the mountains, rivers, bridges of which Williams' sang with growing frustration and urgency – predictably arose. Despite the pressing quality, Williams' repetition, 'Näher bin ich nicht dem Ziel' (I am no nearer my goal), suggested the draining shock of disenchantment and betrayal. The delicate balance of pleasure and pain, which results in Romantic ecstasy and despair in equal measure, was conveyed by Williams in Schumann's 'Widmung', a song of dedication and devotion to the composer's beloved Clara, who is his 'heart', 'rapture' and 'pain' – literally his angel, his whole world. Full-bodied passion certainly rippled through the opening of the song, but there was fear and insecurity too. Drake negotiated the pianistic challenges effortlessly, contributing to the sense of elation with which the song concluded, while Williams' lyrical enunciation of the German text was a complete joy. And, the structure of Brahms' 'Mit vierzig Jahren' was expressively exploited to convey the sense of life being on a precipice as one enters one's fifth decade, while the final stanza intimated, through its expansiveness and enriching, an acceptance of what the years would bring and the preordained close.

Williams also dipped into the English repertoire that he loves and sings so compellingly. 'Youth' concluded optimistically, when Padmore joined the baritone for a dulcet but lively rendition of Vaughan Williams' setting of Shakespeare's 'It was a lover and his lass', and Williams opened the post-interval 'soldier' sequence with a beautiful performance of Butterworth's 'The lads in their hundreds' (from *A Shropshire Lad*), capturing the simple wistfulness and the urgent sincerity of the desire to know those 'fortunate fellows that now you can never discern'. Subtly nuanced diction underlined the import of the closing line, 'The lads that will die in the glory and never be old', and Drake's unfussy postlude accentuated the poignancy of their passing. Vaughan Williams' 'The Vagabond' (the opening song of *Songs of Travel*) trod a dry and brittle path, the briskness of Williams' vocal line injecting a note of surprising, but convincing, anger.

'The Vagabond' followed Mark Padmore's interpretation of French songs by Poulenc and Fauré, repertoire which I have not previously heard the tenor perform. He displayed an instinctive feeling for the intensity communicated by the sounds and rhythms of the texts. Poulenc's 'rookie' ('Bleuet') was characterised with tenderness, his otherworldly bravery and acceptance of fate communicated in an ethereal whisper at the close, 'O sweetness of bygone days/ Slow-moving beyond all memory', the homoerotic undertones evoked by Padmore's caressing head voice. In Fauré's 'Prison', Drake's gentle pulsing was burdened with a melancholy weight, and Padmore's diminuendo, to a pianissimo that was almost nothing, was heart-breaking: 'Dis, qu'as-tu fait, toi que voilà,/ De ta jeunesse.' (Say, o say, what have you done with all your youthful days?)

It wasn't all gloom and despair. Earlier there had been optimism and vigour in Padmore's performance of Fauré's 'Donc, ce sera par un clair jour d'été' and in Schubert's 'Willkommen und Abschied', he injected brightness and strength into his tenor to bring forth the joy and ardour of youthful passion. Williams found an elegiac tenderness in Ives' 'Tom sails away', the exquisite closing diminuendo carrying the poet-speaker and us beyond time and into felt experience: 'Tom sailed away for over there!/ Scenes from

childhood are floating before my eyes.’ In Barber’s ‘Bessie Bobtail’, Drake’s dilatory bass motif conveyed a dismal inevitability, but Padmore’s dramatic enunciation and vocal heightening had a rhetorical elegance.

Victoria Newlyn, embodying the poet-speakers of diverse literary voices – Thom Gunn and Carol Ann Duffy, A.A. Milne and U.A. Fanthorpe, Donne and Wordsworth, Shakespeare and Yeats, among others – brought to life a range of perspectives, sometimes wry, sometimes sad, always engaging. Occasionally I wished she had let the spirit of a song settle before embarking on a new poetic mood, but Newlyn’s directness and relaxed dramatisations held the audience’s ear.

The smiles on the performers’ faces as they enjoyed each other’s expressive powers were mirrored, though prevailingly masked, on our own. This was a wonderfully heart-warming, essentially ‘human’ performance, confirming that, as Carver writes, ‘To call myself beloved, to feel myself beloved on the earth’ is indeed ‘enough’. If anyone was in doubt, Padmore’s mystical rendition of Holst’s ‘Journey’s end’ – a masterclass of vocal phrasing, of contrasting chromaticism and consonance – would surely have dispelled fears. Williams joined Padmore in Holst’s final phrase, and the duo’s heartening evocation of Purcell’s ‘sweet security’ offered us a hope and certainty which have been sorely missed and are much in need.

Claire Seymour

Seven Ages: Mark Padmore (tenor), Roderick Williams (baritone), Julius Drake (piano), Victoria Newlyn (narrator)

Vaughan Williams – ‘Infant Joy’, Schubert – ‘Der Vater mit dem Kind’, Clarke – ‘Cradle Song’, Copland – ‘Little Horses’, Britten – ‘Midnight on the Great Western’ and ‘Black Day’, Schubert – ‘Der Pilgrim’ and ‘Willkommen und Abschied’, Schumann – ‘Widmung’, Fauré – ‘Donc ce sera par un clair jour d’été’, Vaughan Williams – ‘It was a lover and his Lass’, Butterworth – ‘Lads in their Hundreds’, Ives – ‘Tom Sails Away’, Poulenc – ‘Bleuet’, Fauré – ‘Prison’, Vaughan Williams – ‘The Vagabond’, Schumann – ‘Herbstlied’, Brahms – ‘Mit vierzig Jahren’, Britten – ‘As it is Plenty’, Brahms – ‘Phänomen’, Barber – ‘Bessie Bobtail’, Holst – ‘Journey’s End’, Purcell – ‘An Evening Hymn’.

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