

Raucous virtuosity in Barokksolistene's Alehouse Sessions follows intriguing *Schöne Müllerin*

Nothing quite prepares you for the riot of musical colour that Barokksolistene call their Alehouse Sessions, a dizzying kaleidoscope of musical genres and moods. Crossover is difficult to pull off: you have to be an incredibly talented and inquisitive musician to avoid sounding like a numpty to an aficionado of a genre you weren't originally trained in. Barokksolistene are packed with musicians who do it superbly.



Thomas Guthrie

Here's the idea. In 1642, Oliver Cromwell declared that "public stage plays were of lascivious merth and levity". London's theatres were shut down and the capital was flooded with unemployed musicians – an eerie premonition of the state of things last summer. Unlike last summer, however, the musicians in 1642 were able to take refuge in the city's thousands of taverns, creating some earnings – and possibly a certain level of public nuisance – as they went. So Barokksolistene seek to recreate the atmosphere of a 17th-century London tavern, a unique combination of musical virtuosity and raucous banter. There are limitations, of course. You can't quite emulate the spit, sawdust and stench of cheap alcohol in the gentility of Middle Temple Hall. In compensation, though, you do have a giant portrait of Charles I looking over you to add character.

The music starts off in an era when court music was still close to its popular dance music roots, before the two became distilled into their separate streams of "classical" and "folk". So the "classical early music" stream is represented by Purcell, himself a regular denizen of London alehouses. The folk streams come from everywhere: jigs, reels, sea shanties and slow airs from Scotland and Scandinavia, there was bluegrass, klezmer, flamenco – in addition to playing and singing flamenco, one of the Barokksolistene's guitarists, Steve Player, turns out to be an accomplished dancer. All of it was delivered with unbridled joy in the players' ability to ratchet up the speed and play tricks on each other, or to switch into elegiac mood for a heart-melting version of Robert Burns' *My Love is Like a Red, Red Rose*, or to grab an (obviously planted) audience member for an epic rendering of *The Raggle Taggle Gypsies* – the said audience member turning out to be soprano Mary Bevan, sounding fabulous on the next song. You couldn't ask for a better celebration of a dozen different folk music idioms, or for a more genial compere than Thomas

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Reviewed at Middle Temple Hall,
London on 18 November 2021

PROGRAMME

Schubert, *Die schöne Müllerin* (W. Müller), D. 795

Barokksolistene, The Alehouse Sessions

PERFORMERS

Thomas Guthrie, *Bartone*

Barokksolistene



Guthrie.

The Alehouse Sessions formed the second half of a concert of generous length. The first half was an ambitious idea: to take Schubert's great song cycle *Die schöne Müllerin* and enhance it with puppetry and additional texts as well as arranging the accompaniment for Barokksolistene's folk-baroque sound world. The performance must have come as a severe shock to Schubert purists, but the idea definitely has its merits.



Die schöne Müllerin has a clear narrative arc as the narrator makes his journey from youthful exuberance to, in succession, the pangs of love's uncertainties, the joy of its fulfilment and the despair of its loss, all the while accompanied by the flowing water of the babbling brook. That storytelling arc is a close match for the narrative ballads found in folk music and the instrumentation suits it well. The interpolated texts were beautifully read by Rhiannon Harper Rafferty and they definitely added something to the experience, keeping me nicely on the rails of the story when an undiluted dose of allusive poetry might not have done. I was disappointed by the puppetry, particularly since Middle Temple Hall is a wide and shallow hall, so much of the time, I couldn't really see what was being done.

Thomas Guthrie is a competent baritone rather than a world class Lieder singer and a performance of this type loses something of the pure musical beauty achieved by a singer and single accompanist 100% focused on delivering it. But for anyone not a Lieder expert, this works in shining a light on *Die schöne Müllerin* as a wonderfully structured piece of narrative, which, to my mind, is a thoroughly worthwhile achievement.

★★★★