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Friday, 19 November 2021

From a puppet 'Liederspiel' to men behaving badly: Thomas Guthrie and Barokksolistene at Temple Music

Labels: concert review, Temple Music



The Alehouse Session - Thomas Guthrie, Bjarte Eike and Barokksolistene in Oslo (Photo Knut Utler)

Schubert's *Die schöne Müllerin*, *The Alehouse Sessions*; Thomas Guthrie, Bjarte Eike, Barokksolistene; Temple Music at Middle Temple Hall

Reviewed by Robert Hugill on 18 November 2021

Star rating: 3.0 (★★★)

A very free interpretation of Schubert's song cycle which returned the work to its roots, and an evocation of a 17th century alehouse in an evening which by turns dazzled the imagination and frustrated.

Last night's Temple Music concert at Middle Temple Hall brought together several different strands with director and baritone Thomas Guthrie at their centre. Guthrie's association with Middle Temple goes back to when he sang with Temple Church Choir, and more recently he has directed such events as Purcell's *The Fairy Queen* there. Guthrie also has a long association with Bjarte Eike's Barokksolistene, performing with them as singer and violinist in their iconic Alehouse Sessions. And Guthrie's own recent projects with his Music and Theatre for All include plans to reinterpret the three great Schubert song-cycles, bringing an element of story-telling back to them. And in fact, last night's audience included participants in another of his projects, Lewisham Urban Opera.

So, on 18 November 2021, Thomas Guthrie, Bjarte Eike and Barokksolistene presented a theatrically staged event in Middle Temple Hall which saw Schubert's *Die schöne Müllerin* in a dramatic re-interpretation performed by Guthrie along with puppeteer Sean Garrett and narrator Rhiannon Harper Rafferty, plus a new accompaniment from Barokksolistene. Then after the interval we gathered for one of Barokksolistene's Alehouse Sessions. The result was an evening of music making which pushed the boundaries of convention in various imaginative ways, and by turns delighted, intrigued and frustrated.

When we listen to a work such as Schubert's *Die schöne Müllerin* performed today, it is so iconic and all-embracing that performers rarely interrogate the piece's form, function and dramatic structure. Its origins are somewhat anecdotal, contemporaries of the composer remembering stories after his death, and the tradition of performing the work as a whole only started some twenty-something years after Schubert's death. Indeed, the idea of a public song-recital as such was a later 19th century development, and with limited public performances of his music during his lifetime, Schubert can hardly have anticipated his work being at the centre of an iconic recital tradition.

Guthrie's staging of the piece goes back to two separate strands of the work's history. Poet Wilhelm Müller's verse has its origin in a Liederspiel created by Müller for performance with friends, costumed, dramatic and certainly not formal. Whilst Müller probably envisioned music, he never knew Schubert's version (and Schubert didn't set all of Müller's text). The composer's songs were often performed at casual events, parties where people performed and the music was mixed with apparently riotous behaviour and creative freedom. Schubert was known to perform his songs himself, and his voice was none too great evidently, and when composing if a piano was not available (as was often the case in his lodgings) he made do with his guitar.

Die schöne Müllerin was described as 'a selection of the songs, arranged by Thomas Guthrie with Barokksolistene'. All 20 songs were present, but as many are strophic I cannot be sure that all the verses were there. Guthrie sang the baritone part, and joined with puppeteer Sean Garrett in manipulating Mandarava Butlin's striking large-size puppet of the young miller

(head, arms and torso only), whilst narrator Rhiannon Harper Rafferty joined with the spoken verses that Guthrie had added, creating a prologue, epilogue and interstitial material in the manner of Müller's original.

The highly effective accompaniment made no attempt to re-create the sound-world of a Schubert string ensemble, instead we had string quartet, double bass and two guitars creating a magical sound-world that owed a lot to the ensemble's seeming fondness for exploring different textures and timbres in the music, mixing plucked and bowed in imaginative fashion. Whilst the full ensemble was often used, smaller groupings were too and one or two songs were very effective with just the accompaniment of a single guitar.

The puppet protagonist was effectively created from three component parts, the puppet itself, the puppeteer Sean Garrett and Thomas Guthrie who both manipulated the puppet with Garrett and sang the solo role. Occasionally Guthrie stepped away from the young miller, on those occasions when the authorial voice of the poet takes over. Guthrie has had a distinguished career as a singer and recitalist, though more recently his directing has taken over. Here he was scrupulous in his attention to the words, projecting them strongly. I did wonder, given the production's intentions to open up the work and to make it more directly accessible, whether performing it in Jeremy Sams' fine translation might have been a better option. Instead we had projected words which were only intermittently readable in the hall.

Vocally, Guthrie seemed to veer closer to musical theatre in his delivery, often the music was on the edge of the voice, and he was quite free with his use of changes of register and types of delivery that would not necessarily feature in a conventional recital. Sometimes, though, his voice did not quite deliver all that he expected of it, and this was particularly true of faster dramatic passages which included complex movement for the puppet, and the music seemed to become partially obscured.

The performance brought a sense of drama to the work, and the puppet protagonist was indeed highly effective. But as modern drama, even a trimmed *Die schöne Müllerin* is rather slow and the pacing did not always seem to work, requiring rather a lot of moments when the young man gazed around moon-eyed. I wondered whether it was wise of Guthrie to create a project so centred on himself and that it might have been better to step back and involve another singer, also the whole project might have been improved by having a separate singer who was trusted to be a performer in their own right. However, *Die schöne Müllerin* does not celebrate its 200th birthday until 2023 so there is plenty of time for Guthrie to develop the project.

After the interval the mood was very different indeed. Barokksolistene's Alehouse Sessions are a long running feature of the group's performing. The idea for them arose out of the peculiar musical culture that existed in England during the mid-17th century. With Oliver Cromwell's closing of theatres and stopping of any public music making, professional musicians became unemployed. A few favoured ones retired to live with aristocratic patrons, providing them with music, but many simply resorted to the ale houses, where a strong musical culture already existed. Thus music in pubs developed into a lively and complex affair that, after the Restoration fed into the development of an early concert culture in England.

But Bjarte Eike and Barokksolistene take quite a freewheeling approach to the event, this is not an academic recreation and in many ways Barokksolistene resembled a group like the late Belinda Sykes' Joglearesa, bringing together period style with modern improvisatory performance techniques taken from other traditions to enliven a forgotten performance style. Often, the result had the air of a Cèilidh and indeed the playing of the ensembles three violins and viola (Bjarte Eike, Milos Valent, Thomas Guthrie, Per Buhre) frequently resembled the sound-world of the traditional Scottish fiddle ensemble, with the emphasis on unison strings but each player performing with freedom. Other traditions wandered in too, and there were klezmer moments, hints of Hungarian gypsy as well as a final medley which moved firmly to Spain. We seemed to avoid England, and the four-square sound of the Morris dance was absent.

There was a similar freewheeling approach to the songs, and traditional rhymes and catches could leap into a more formally inspired piece. Perhaps the most imaginative was when a rather over-the-top dramatisation of the Scots ballad, *The Raggle Taggle Gypsies* involved pulling soprano Mary Bevan out of the audience and then her singing a profoundly lovely 17th century song.

The evening was at its best when the performers stayed closer to the original material, but often there was a tendency to lard the performance with humour and over-done drama. As the atmosphere relaxed, then so did the performers and the final Spanish set veered alarmingly close to self-indulgence with nine men behaving badly (cellist Judith-Maria Blomsterberg seemed to take a breather at this point). Bringing this type of music to life, however, is tricky and requires a balancing act between a live 21st century pub band and a period instrument ensemble. Here, the performers were clearly feeding off the audience, and the audience loved it.