

Matthew Rose and Friends at Temple Church

A review by Claire Seymour

I was very much looking forward to this concert at Temple Church, curated by bass Matthew Rose and designed to celebrate music for voice commissioned by the Michael Cuddigan Trust, not least because it offered the opportunity to listen again to compositions heard recently - some for the first time - in different settings, and to experience works discussed coming to fruition in performance.



I met with composer Kate Whitely in February to talk about her new settings of Charlotte Mew's poetry. One of the issues we'd discussed was the way Kate would respond to Mew's occasional regularity - of rhyme or structure - which seemed to require a different approach to text-setting to that which she usually employed. In the event, what struck me most was the way that the prosaic quality of Mew's poetry has shaped Kate's musical response, but also, and correspondingly, the way that the composer imposes her own will on the poetic form and syntax to create persuasive musical structures and idioms.

Much of the success, I feel, of these settings lies in the craftsmanship of the accompanying string quartet dramas and conversations. The first poem 'Sea Love' commenced with a beautifully free viola gesture (played expressively and confidently by Zoë Matthews) which simultaneously suggests both the capaciousness and capriciousness of the ocean, as the player's bow whips in a whisper across the strings, mimicking the dynamic surges of wave and tide. But, the instruments are no mere 'sea-scape', a backdrop to the vocal line: instead, phrase-endings resume and rework vocal motifs. Matthew Rose's sonorous bass rang out with the passion and poise of an old sea-farer evoking a man who, like Britten's Captain Vere, "has experienced much".

'The Farmer's Bride' - a rural man's frustrated account of his marriage to a woman who rejects his attentions and demands - was fittingly agitated, Corentin Chassard's cello line fluttering with breath-consuming anger and impotence, further rent by stuttering leaps. Increasingly, as Rose's narrative accrued a fearsome, repressed power, I found myself wondering, 'Where is the woman's voice?' In the sustained tones, or in the gestures of movement and escape? The declamatory melodic idiom and steady rhythmic repetitions - "Shy as a leveret, swift as he,/Straight and slight as a young larch tree,/Sweet as the first wild violets, she,/To her wild self. But what to me?" - seemed to embody both the wife's inscrutability and the farmer's vexation. Both are violent energies which explode in a crescendoing tremolo at the close, tumbling gratefully through depths of anger, anxiety and ineffectualness.

After 'Rooms', in which the *ppp* violins (Fiona McCapra) evoked the rootlessness of identity and the struggle for communion that Mew seeks to explore and overcome, Rose was replaced by Katherine Broderick for the final three songs. McCapra's shaping of the violin's whimsical and impulsive flourishes - all open strings, slippery slithers and sparks - was masterful and established a spirit of youthfulness and rebelliousness in 'I so liked Spring ...', while gentle pizzicatos, hushed and dry, hinted at the 'Absence' at the heart of the following poem-setting, though Whitley never let the momentum dissipate, pushing forward with the "beat, beat/Of hooves that tread dropped roses in the street.", then allowing the music to succumb to languidness, vanishing at the close: "Over my mouth, I must answer. So,/I will come - He shall let me go."

Restlessness returned in 'Moorland Night', where rushing scales, flutterings and oscillations characterised the string textures. I did find the shift to soprano voice after the first three bass songs, half-way through the sequence, a little unsettling, especially given the ambiguity of the poet-speaker's voice (and in the light of Mew's own equivocal sexuality), but in all three settings for soprano Broderick used the text and vocal colour to bring affecting emotion to the fore. Here, the image of the curlew, heard as it "start[s] out from the heath/And [flies] off calling through the dusk" was compelling, all the more so for the sudden quiet that followed its "wild, long, rippling call -:".

The recital had begun with Tom Poster's *The Turning Year*, Poster himself accompanying Rose. I heard the first performance of the pianist-composer's settings of poetry by his father, Jem Poster, at Wigmore Hall at the start of the month, so won't comment at length on details. But, I did find that this performance had a greater, and welcome, freedom in delivery. Perhaps it was the Temple Church acoustic that carried the piano's paradoxically fragilesteely glitterings aloft, and enriched the innate amplitude and warmth of Rose's capacious and communicative bass, or perhaps it was familiarity - on my part, and on the part of the performers - but *The Turning Year* engaged me much more intently and emotionally on this occasion. If only Rose had more frequently looked up from his score, so engrossed did he seem to be in the music's progress. The pictorialisms of the summer landscape - "a fuzz of sound: the hum of bees fumbling the heather-bells,/the burring flight of beetles, the crickets' seamless song" - here acquired a fresh, urgent presence, and the gradual swirling of the autumn wind burst forth with a frightening, visceral force, which seemed to propel Rose through the text with dynamism and drama, making the easing of the final line - "You draw the curtains, bring food to the table, set the evening right." - even more affecting. With the coming of winter, the high piano turned brittle, though a melodious falling 6th in the vocal line, "the hills are white with snow", offered consolation. Rose's inky bass wonderfully conveyed the "gathering darkness" at the close which "brings them home".

In contrast, I found Jordan Hunt's *Songs Without* (in which the composer sets his own text) rather tiresome, though there could be no fault with the performances of Broderick, Poster, violinist Jan Schmolck and cellist Sally Pendlebury. The biography offered in the programme suggests that Hunt, drawing on his experiences as a violinist in *The Irrepressibles* 'creates vivid, emotive music, weaving melodic 'sad pop' and symphonic-inspired textures'; I found the minimalist rockings, repetitions, oscillations and harmonic stagnation to be disengaging, though the musicians made every effort to introduce dynamic gradation and variety, and Broderick sought to imbue the vocal line with colours inferring popular and folk influences, and to find drama in the text. The voice's fortissimo rise at the close of 'Song Without Love/Song Without Abandon' ("Your pinion to fly/ Your atlas to be free") generated real movement and freedom. And, there were onomatopoeic accompaniment gestures - as in the metallic snap of "Clipped wings" at the start of 'Song Without End/Song Without Return'; or the soporific translucence of the string repetitions in 'Song Without Sleep/Song Without Death' - that did focus one's attention. The almost Straussian gloss and richness of Broderick's soprano at the close seemed to carry the music on into eternity.

David Bruce tackles some challenging texts in *Out of Hours*, the five poems of which share a theme, being connected by times of the day when we may feel 'connected to life and emotions'. However, the poetry by Shakespeare, Blake, Dunbar, Donne and Keats expresses its 'meaning' as much by its formal patterning

and control as by individual images and words, and Bruce's fragmentation of the text into disjunction words and phrases did not aid our comprehension of the broader semantic and poetic meaning. Thus, the minimalist throbbings and oscillations accompanied Matthew Rose in 'Full Many a Glorious Morning' (Shakespeare) seemed to inspire a melismatic elongation of syllable and word which I found disruptive to communication of the poem's intent. The frisky rhythmic interplay of the violins and violas did conjure the vivacity of the children's communal games depicted by Blake in 'The Nurse's Song' - the pizzicato playfulness reminded me of Britten's *Simple Symphony* - which was dynamically sung by Broderick. And, 'On Leaving some Friends at an Early Hour' was notable for some ethereal colours in the strings and the 'strangeness' of unearthly harmonics. But, despite the commitment of both Rose and Broderick, I found it hard to engage with these settings.

Bruce employed a string septet, and this offered the opportunity to close the concert with a performance of Strauss's *Metamorphosen* arranged for the same forces. I heard the Britten Sinfonia perform this version at Wigmore Hall in February: it's not easy to master its scale, form and intensity with just seven players. Here, the ensemble was sometimes less than precise - Schmolck did not really seem to 'lead' the ensemble, and there were some anxious glances between the players - and the performance was tense rather than imbued with dramatic tension and release. It's a repetitive work, so the recurring motifs need to be carefully delineated and calibrated for the structural backbone to be discernible; here there was no persuasive sense of gradation, progress, climax and resolution. Perhaps the players had not had adequate time to rehearse? Whatever, it was a competent rather than a compelling performance.

During the evening Kate Whitley was awarded the 2018 Critics Circle Award. Her *Six Settings of Charlotte Mew*, alongside her other compositions and community-orientated activities, more than justified this accolade and I greatly look forward to hearing more from this talented young composer in the future.

Claire Seymour

Matthew Rose and Friends: Temple Music, Temple Church, London; Tuesday 30th April 2019.

Matthew Rose (bass), Katherine Broderick (soprano), Fiona McCapra/Jan Schmolck/Eloisa Fleur Thom (violin), Zoë Matthews/Douglas Paterson (viola), Corentin Chassard/Sally Pendlebury (cello), Lynda Houghton (double bass), Tom Poster (piano)

Jordan Hunt - Songs Without; Tom Poster - The Turning Year; Kate Whitley - Six Charlotte Mew Settings (world premiere); David Bruce - Out of Hours (world premiere); Strauss - Metamorphosen

