

Love Songs: Temple Song Series, Temple Church

A review by Claire Seymour

In contrast to the 'single-shaming' advertisement - "To the 12,750 people who ordered a single takeaway on Valentine's Day. You ok, hun?" - for which the financial services company,



Revolut, were taken to task, this Temple Music recital programme on 14th February put the emphasis firmly on partnerships: intimate, impassioned and impetuous.

Not a solo vocalist, but rather four young prize winners - a soprano and mezzo soprano, a tenor and a baritone - serenaded us, and each other, during this recital of Romantic lieder, for solo and ensemble voices, in Temple Church. When Brahms sent the manuscript of his first book of ländler-like *Liedeslieder Walzer* Op.52 to his publisher Simrock, in 1869, he described the set of eighteen songs for four voices and piano four hands as *Hausmusik*. Perhaps an expression of his growing passion for Robert and Clara Schumann's third daughter, Julie, the songs, when still in manuscript form, would have been first performed at domestic gatherings in Clara's house in Baden-Baden, during the summer of the preceding year. Gemma Summerfield, Fleur Barron, James Way and Julien van Mellaerts were not exactly gathered around Julius Drake and Stacey Bartsch, seated at the Steinway positioned where the Round Church meets the nave, but they made a potentially intimate group.

Unfortunately, the acoustic of this medieval/Gothic revival church does not naturally lend itself to multitudinous melodising, especially when a quartet of vibrato-heavy operatic voices does battle with the fan of the underfloor heating system, as was the case during the first seven of the *Liedeslieder Walzer* on this occasion. Initially, at least, it was quite difficult to take in the resonant richness of the quartet as they launched with zeal into the quasiSchubertian vigour of the waltzes, with their boisterous swinging cross-rhythms and vivacious romantic dialogues.

But, the sixth waltz, 'Ein kleiner, hübscher Vogel' (A pretty little bird), more lightly traversed diverse moods, and Gemma Summerfield's subsequent rendition of 'Wohl schön bewandt' (All seemed rosy) offered a vocal sheen and sensitivity of expression which were cleansing. The ensemble timbre was particularly tender in 'Wenn so lind dein Auge mir' (When you gaze at me so tenderly), while 'Ein dunkler Schacht ist Liebe' (Love is a dark pit) pushed forward with fitting urgency. James Way impressed in 'Nicht wandle, mein Licht' (Do not wander, my love), singing with yearning tenderness but with sufficient focus and weight to avoid over-sweet sentimentality, and making much more of the words than was possible in the ensembles.

The original publication described the vocal/chorus parts as 'optional', and Brahms's piano parts are characteristically rich in detail and nuance. The two pianists brought as much variety as they could to the tripping lilt and sway, and did not let a detail pass them by, as when Drake's low, dark bass line at the start of, 'Die grüne Hopfenranke', gently evoked the "green tendrils of the vine" that "Creep low along the ground". In the concluding 'Es bebet das Gesträuche' the piano staccatos wryly mimicked the trembling foliage which itself embodies the shudders of the poet's heart when he thinks of his beloved.

It's no doubt a matter of personal taste, but despite the variety of poetic moods, I found the incessant triple-time meter - and Brahms is not averse to an oom-pah-pah - and rich vocal blend somewhat relentless: rather as if one had over-indulged on Sachertorte with hefty dollops of Schlagobers. It doesn't help that the texts, translations by poet and philosopher Georg Friedrich Daumer of East European folk poems, are rather undistinguished.

The fifteen songs of Brahms's *Neue Liebeslieder Walzer Op. 65* (1875), which closed the concert, are however both more light-footed and more sincere of sentiment; there is less ebullient hopefulness and good cheer, and more doubt and disenchantment - perhaps expressive of Brahms's anguish when his beloved Julie married an Italian nobleman, Count Marmonto Di Radicati, just a few days after the completion of the Op.52 set.

Here, too, one finds greater diversity of texture with many of the songs being written for solo voice or duet, and more imaginative engagement with the texts in the piano accompaniments. Drake and Bartsch swirled eerily at the start of 'Finstere Schatten der Nacht' (Sinister shadows of the night) and their enthusiastic pounding in the Russian-Polish dance song, 'Vom Gebirge, Well auf Well' (From the mountains, wave upon wave) was matched by the quartet's exuberance: as if everyone had downed a few shots of vodka during the interval.

The soprano has the lion's share of the solos, and if an overly wide vibrato weakened the focus of the line in 'An jeder Hand die Finger' (I had adorned the fingers), then Summerfield soared with simple grace through 'Rosen steckt mir an die Mutter' (My mother pins roses on me). She valiantly attempted to make a narrative of 'Alles, alles in den Wind' (Every single thing you say to me), frowning indignantly at Way during his ardent rendition of the preceding 'Ich kose süß mit der und der' (I sweetly caress this girl and that). Julien van Mellaerts displayed strong rhetorical power in 'Ihr schwarzen Augen' (You, jet-black eyes) and Fleur Barron was similarly adept at slipping into different personae, the sensuous layers of her mezzo bringing expressive depth to 'Wahre, wahre deinen Sohn' (Protect, protect your son). The soprano-alto duet, 'Nein, Geliebter, stezte dich' (No, beloved, do no sit), was one of the evening's highpoints, the beautifully reverent tone enhanced by Drake's soft low pedal and the delicately running inner lines of the accompaniment.

In the final song of Brahms Op.65 set, the poet-narrator of Goethe's 'Nun, ihr Musen, genug!' (the only text not by Daumer) dejectedly banishes the Muses which have failed him in his quest to expressive the anguish of love-sickness. The Muse certainly didn't desert Robert Schumann when he composed his *Spanische Liebeslieder Op. 138* (1949), the two books of which framed the interval. Schumann sets texts from the German poet and philologist Emanuel von Geibel's *Volkslieder und Romanzen der Spanier*, translations of songs and poems by Spanish and Portuguese Renaissance poets, and if there is nothing that called be termed 'genuinely Spanish' about these ten songs then there are rich colours, occasionally darkened with sombre shadows, toe-tapping bolero rhythms and guitar-like textures that inject an uplifting spirit. But, more than that, the songs have a sincerity and naturalness of expression as conveyed, for example, by the stillness and focus that Summerfield controlled with such poise at the close of 'Tief im Herzen trag' ich Pein' (Deep in my heart I bear my grief).

The ladies' duet, 'Bedeckt mich mit Blumen', was ripe with drama and feeling. Van Mellaerts sang the romance, 'Flutenreicher Ebro' (Surging River Ebro), as he strolled amidst the audience seated in the nave, and if the text that he sang in the second stanza bore little resemblance to that printed in the programme,

then his delicate pianissimo in the subsequent stanza and the earnest heightening of the plea, 'Fragt sie, fragt sie' (Ask her, ask her), were plentiful compensation for the lapse of memory. The singers indulged in some quasi-operatic playfulness in 'Blaue Augen hat das Mädchen' (The girl has blue eyes), the urbane charm of Way and van Mellaerts eventually winning over the disdainful Barron.

And, there was more fun and 'theatre' at the close, in an encore which reprised one of the Brahms waltzes which had opened the concert, but reinterpreted, with more unbridled spice and glee. Here, at last, we could imagine the depth of Brahms's infatuation with Julie that led him to texts that both captured and inflamed his dreams - "Tell me, maiden dearest, who has with your glances roused these wild ardours in this cool breast of mine, will you not soften your heart?" - and also the exquisite blend of pleasure and pain that those song-filled evenings in the Schumanns' salon must have brought him.

Claire Seymour

Gemma Summerfield (soprano), Fleur Barron (mezzo-soprano), James Way (tenor), Julien van Mellaerts (baritone), Julius Drake (piano), Stacey Bartsch (piano).

Brahms - Liebeslieder Walzer Op.52; Schumann - Spanische Liebeslieder Op.138; Brahms - Neue Liebeslieder Walzer Op.65

Temple Church, London; Thursday 14th February 2019.

