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Swan songs - Gerald Finley and Julius Drake at Temple Song



Schubert *Schwanengesang*, Brahms *Four serious songs*; Gerald Finley, Julius Drake; Temple Song at Middle Temple Hall Reviewed by Robert Hugill on 2 October 2018 Star rating: 5.0 (*****)

Masterly performances of two great works from Gerald Finley and Julius Drake

Temple Song returned to Middle Temple Hall on Tuesday 2 October 2018 for the first recital of Temple Music's 2018/19 season. Bass-baritone Gerald Finley joined pianist Julius Drake for *Swansongs*, performing two late works, Schubert's *Schwanengesang* and Brahms' *Four serious songs*. A programme which the two performed at the Elbphilharmonie in Hamburg in September.

Schubert's final song-cycle, *Schwanengesang* consists of a group of songs setting texts by Rellstab, a group setting texts by Heine and a final song setting a text by Seidl. There is some doubt about whether it is a song cycle at all, but a convincing argument can be made on both musical and musicological grounds. Though arguably the final song, *Die Taubenpost* setting a text by Seidl, was added by the original publisher it is now a settled part of the sequence in its own right.

Gerald Finley addressed these issues by performing all the songs from the cycle but splitting them up so in the first half of the concert we heard the Rellstab settings followed by the Brahms, and in the second half the remainder of the Schubert. It was an arrangement which worked surprisingly well, highlighting not only the two composers' final vocal works but also their parallel concerns about life and death.

Singing from memory, Finley's performance of Schubert combined a wonderful projection of the words with a finely smooth line and a manner which suggested the singer recalling past events. Finley was demonstrative without being overly operatic, with more tightly controlled gestures than on the opera stage and a superb projection of his lovely even baritone voice, and I particularly loved the way he could lighten the tone for effect in the upper register.

Whilst the Rellstab settings do not tell a story, they all involve a distant/absent beloved (perhaps a testament to Beethoven who had started to work on the poems just before his death), and Finley's performance gave a continuity so this. So the dark and serious *Kriegers Ahnung* had lyrical memories of

the beloved which evoked the first song, *Liebesbotschaft*. In fact, *Kriegers Ahnung* manages to pack a lot in, including the drama of battle. *Frühlings-Sehnsucht* was headlong yet controlled, and with each verse Finley and Drake turned the screw in intensity, returning to quietly intense control in *Ständchen*. *Aufenthalt* combined a stormy piano with Finley lovely dark voice, which grew in intensity until almost overwhelming. The climax must surely have been *In die Ferne* which was sombre and dark, with a quiet yet gorgeous sound but the concentration and intensity of Finley's performance were mesmerising and almost overwhelming. *Abschied* came almost as a relief, but whilst Drake's piano was perky, Finley's baritone was serious in intent as well as full of character.

Brahms *Four Serious Songs* were written in 1896, ten years after his last song settings. Inspired by the death of Clara Schumann, these were some of the last works that Brahms wrote. Whilst the four songs all use Bible texts, with the first three examining thoughts of death, God hardly appears. These are deliberately agnostic in feel, with Brahms using the final song's considerations of Love as a prompt for a consolatory message.

The first song *Denn es gehet dem Menschen* started out smoothly sculptural, with a more dynamic sense and a greater projection of the meaning in the middle section. *Ich wandte mich* was beautifully flowing yet still serious in intent, with both performers responding to the great freedom with which Brahms treated the text, these are songs which at times almost move into poetic recitative. *O Tod* was intent and intense, and there was something comforting in the sheer beauty of the way Finley and Drake performed the middle section. Finally *Wenn ich mit Menschen*, which at times saw Finley being surprisingly vehement, rising to a glorious and serious conclusion which consoled by its sheer intensity.

After the interval, we returned to Schubert with the Heine settings from *Schwanengesang*. *Atlas* contrasted Finley's intense and vibrant, yet serious account of the vocal line with the vivid piano playing from Drake with strong stabbing notes. *Ihr Bild* was stunningly bleak and still, whilst *Das Fischer mädchen* was certainly not as simple as it first appeared. In *Die Stadt* Drake's wonderfully evocative piano combined with Finley's veiled voice to devastating effect at the end. The mood continued bleak and haunted in *Am Meer*, with a feeling of being emptied out at the end which carried over into *Der Doppelgänger* rose with each verse to reach an incredible combination of intensity and volume. *Die Taubenpost* was certainly something of a relief, yet whilst full of character the performance remained quite steady and rather moving; a sense of clinging on to hope and longing in the face of all things.

The capacity audience was highly enthusiastic and we were treated to an encore, which Finley dedicated to the memory of the late judge, Lord Browne-Wilkinson, a masterly performance Schubert's *Du bist die Ruh*.