

## Bevan and Drake travel to 1840s Leipzig

Julius Drake must have had a lot of fun compiling this lieder programme, which was inspired by a visit to the home of Robert and Clara Schumann on Inselstraße in Leipzig. The couple lived in this classical building during the 1840s and the visitors' book reads like a roll call of the greatest Romantic artists - composers, poets, performers - of the day.



The Schumann Haus in Leipzig

As soprano Sophie Bevan explained to me recently (The Schumanns at home), Drake had selected four songs to represent each of five of the Schumanns' illustrious international guests, and the hosts themselves. At the start of the evening, he invited us to imagine ourselves at a musical soirée in the Schumanns' piano nobile apartment, being entertained by some of the cultural elite of the mid-nineteenth century. As Schumann himself said of musical life in Leipzig, 'What an abundance of great works of art were produced for us last winter! How many distinguished artists charmed us with their art!' With such a cornucopia of lieder from which to choose, one wonders how Drake settled upon his selections. Certainly, one could discern distinctive musical 'voices', and it was interesting to hear Clara Schumann's gentle melodising beside Chopin's folk-tinted melancholy, or Liszt's blending of fervent human passion and reverent spirituality. And, as the lieder weaved from German to Polish and back again, with diversions into French and even English, a truly international conversation unfolded. But, there was variety of expressive range within the song-quartets, too. Moreover, Bevan had remarked that many of these songs were new to her, and many were also new to me and so the programme offered numerous fresh discoveries and delights.

This was a very engaging recital, both performers communicating with directness and sincerity. Despite the 'newness' of the material, Sophie Bevan was impressively 'off score' for many of the songs and took evident care to capture the spirit of each lied through the manner of performance.

She seemed a little nervous at the start of the recital, which was her debut at Middle Temple Hall, but still conveyed the tender intimacy of the opening quartet of songs by Clara Schumann. The textural repetitions, fairly low register and narrow range of 'Liebst du um Schönheit' (If you love for beauty) delicately draw us into the conversation; 'Sie liebten sich beide' (They loved each other) was more emotionally heightened but closed with a rueful, sweet-toned whisper, 'Sie waren läb'gst gestorben/Und wußten es selber kaum.' (They died a long time ago and hardly knew it themselves.) 'Der Mond kommt

still gegangen' (The moon rises silently) revealed the subtleties of Clara Schumann's harmonic inventiveness and pianistic writing; Drake traversed sensitively from the relaxed chords of the opening to the more intense piano postlude. But, if the first three songs had shared a quiet serenity, then 'Am Strand' revealed a more turbulent expressive mode which allowed Bevan's soprano to blossom ecstatically in conclusion: as she called to the spirits to murmur tidings of her beloved, the piano's softening response duly obliged.

The lieder by Clara Schumann and the four songs by Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel that followed led me to wish that performers would more regularly embrace the sizeable song repertory by such women composers. Fanny Mendelssohn wrote 249 songs, more than twice as many as her brother Felix, and 'Frühling', with its bubbling, trilling piano part, frequent wide vocal leaps and rapturous blooming at the close revealed an audacious, exuberant approach to song-writing. The harmonic explorations of 'Warum sind denn die Rosen so blaß' (Why are all the roses so pale?) were similarly responsive to the text, as the wandering phrases seemed to echo the unanswered questions of Heine's poem. Again, Drake's discerning selections offered expressive range, the tenderness of 'Nachtwanderer', contrasting with the powerful epiphanies of 'Bergeslust' (Mountain rapture).

One of the strengths of Bevan's performance of these opening songs was the lack of artifice and the sincerity of her engagement with the texts, and I felt that this quality came even more to the fore in the four songs by Felix Mendelssohn. She seemed to relax, perhaps because the songs are more familiar, and 'Die liebende schreibt' (The beloved writes) was sensuous and impassioned. Songs by a mandolin-playing page, by rustling pond reeds and by a coven of witches ensued, and Bevan and Drake moved smoothly from the jaunty spiritedness of 'Pagenlied', through the richness and resignation of 'Schilflied', to the darkness and defiance of 'Hexenlied'.

In the first of four songs selected from Chopin's *Polish Songs* Op.74, the mazurka-like 'Śliczny chłopic' (Handsome lad), Drake immediately established an insouciant air, employing a playful rubato. His fluent pianism imbued these songs with conviction and drama, most particularly in 'Wojak' (The warrior), summoning a crisp vision of a galloping steed whose impatience was equalled by his war-mongering master's elated urgency. At the close, after a momentary stay, man and beast sped onto the bloody battlefield and disappeared over the horizon, the piano diminishing with wonderful control. Given that these are Chopin's only contribution to the vocal repertoire, it's perhaps surprising that the Op.74 songs are not performed more regularly; until, that is, one reflects on the fact that there are probably few singers who would avow to being fluent in, or familiar with, Polish. Bevan pronounced the text with care and suppleness but did not have quite enough declamatory confidence to capture the dramatic intensity of the texts (two of which are anonymous, with additionally one each by Chopin's contemporaries, Stefan Witwicki and Bohdan Zaleski). That said, 'Dumka' had a poignant Slavic sorrow and Bevan's *pianissimos* were touching and perfectly tuned, while the narrative of the Lithuanian song ('Piosnka litewska') unrolled naturally, Drake's staccatos giving life to the dialogue and Bevan displaying rich vocal quality in the lower register.

Drake is the curator of Hyperion's ongoing project to record Liszt's complete songs (to date four volumes have been released) - a worthy and necessary endeavour, given that even lieder enthusiasts may be unaware that Liszt composed any songs other than 'Die Loreley'. Here, the pianist made miniature tone poems of the accompaniments, sparking and trickling with transparency in 'Die stille Wasserrose' (The silent water-lily), and conjuring the majesty of Cologne cathedral in 'Im Rhein, im schönen Strome' (In the Rhine, the beautiful river). Best of all was the brooding concentration of the introduction to 'Der du von dem Himmel bist' (You who come from heaven).

Bevan revealed a strong feeling for the Romantic sensibility in this sequence, and the vocal range with which to express it. Often her soprano descended quite low, as at the openings of 'Die stille Wasserrose' and 'Im Rhein', and she used vocal colour to imbue these songs with a quasi-spiritual ambience. Elsewhere, such as at the contemplative close of 'Ihr Glocken von Marling' (Bells of Marling), the mood

was ethereal, and the high melody at the end of 'Im Rhein', which floated above Drake's low *pianissimo* accompaniment, shimmered with reverence for 'Our beloved Lady'. In contrast, 'Der du von dem Himmel bist' was impelled by anxious but irresistible urgency and intensity, attaining rapturous transcendence in the final, surging line, 'Komm, ach komm in meine Brust!' (Come, ah come into my breast!).

Bevan showed a similar affinity for a distinctly French sensibility in Berlioz's 'Chant de bonheur' (Song of bliss), in which the melodic line freely hovered between song and recitative, and was matched by the rhythmic flexibility of Drake's accompaniment. 'Petit oiseau' had classical, even 'antique', elegance and Bevan's *piano* invitation, 'Viens écouter ses chants touchants' (Come and listen to his moving song) was focused and compelling. 'Adieu Bessy', a setting of a poem by Thomas Moore (one of one of nine composed in 1829 to translation by Berlioz's friend, Thomas Gounet), possessed rhetorical weight despite the sweetness of the vocal line; 'Zaïde' was propelled by Drake's insistent rhythmic motifs and the ecstatic, fluctuating colours of Bevan's soprano.

Four songs by Robert Schumann brought the soirée to a close. Bevan mastered the vocal expanse of 'Widmung' (Dedication), the melodic line unfolding lyrically above the fervent murmurings and motions of the piano accompaniment. Again, she showed that her lower register has real focus and presence, falling with the change of mood - 'Du bist die Ruh, du bist der Frieden' (You are repose, you are peace) - as, paradoxically, tension was injected by the three against two rhythmic dialogue between piano and voice. 'Die Einsiedler' (The hermit), too, benefitted from an even vocal line, while the final song, 'Aufträge' (Messages) burred excitedly propelled by an intoxicating lyrical and poetic impulse.

Claire Seymour

Sophie Bevan (soprano), Julius Drake (piano)

Clara Schumann - 'Liebst Du um Schönheit', 'Sie liebten sich beide', 'Der Mond kommt still gegangen', 'Am Strande'; Fanny Mendelssohn - 'Frühling', 'Warum sind den die Rosen so blaß', 'Nachtwanderer', 'Bergeslust'; Felix Mendelssohn - 'Die Liebende schreibt', 'Pagenlied', 'Schilflied', 'Hexenlied'; Frédéric Chopin - 'Śliczny chłopiec', 'Dumka', 'Piosnka litewska', 'Wojak'; Franz Liszt - 'Die stille Wasserrose', 'Ihr Glocken von Marling', 'Im Rhein, im schönen Ströme', 'Der du von dem Himmel bist'; Hector Berlioz - 'Chant du Bonheur', 'Petit oiseau', 'Farewell, Bessy', 'Zaïde'; Robert Schumann - 'Widmung', 'Muttertraum', 'Der Einsiedler', 'Aufträge'.

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