

## Sussex Musicians Unitarian Church, September 16<sup>th</sup> 2023

New talent burst onto the opening concert of the Sussex Musicians, which was mainly vocal.

Jem Byrne, not yet 19 and a pupil of Sue Mileham, is both remarkably assured, and an exemplary presenter. Ensuring she understands the language she sings in, and introducing each with aplomb, she sang with a strong soprano voice seven items from Italian *bel canto* to an American 20<sup>th</sup> century focus by way of Mozart. Nicola Grunberg accompanied with her usual sensitivity and aplomb.

Rossini's 'La Pastorella delle Alpi' provided an admirable warm-up: bright, pure-voiced mountain-air stuff, with an alpine shepherdess. Bellini's 'Vaga Luna' is more romantically lyrical (anonymous text "Beautiful moon, dappling with silver") and Byrne is able to move seamlessly to alternate moods to keep the variety. Though Bantock's 'Song to the Seals' is a rapt piece too, in many ways the centrepiece of the programme revealing even more of the long lines Byrne is mastering, as well as the *bel canto* role of ecstatic wonder in the song: "A sea maid sings on yonder reef,/The spell-bound seals draw near;/Her lilt that lures beyond belief Mortals enchanted hear".

Barber's two songs are more a study of artistic maturity than contrast. The really early Op 2 'The Daisies' set by Barber when 17 in 1927 to a text of James Joyce's friend James Stephens is delicate and pure lyrical. and 'Sure on this shining night' from Op 13 in 1938 is a subtly different lyricism: more mature, piquant, knowing, more lyrically edgy, and darkly delighted. Byrne seems particularly happy in these songs and the Gershwin later, as with the Bantock.

But then there's a surprise as with reverting to Mozart's dramatic pieces, now her voice has warmed up, Byrne reverts to the late 18<sup>th</sup> century 'Als Luise die Briefe' which Mozart wrote just after starting *Don Giovanni*, about a woman burning her lover's letters. Set to a poem of the then 18-year-old Gabriele von Baumberg the German Sappho according to Goethe, it ends on the burning internalised.

It's the dark classical lyrical counterpoise in Byrne's hands to the wild, comic sexual excitement of Cherubino in the previous opera to *Don Giovanni*, *The Marriage of Figaro*. Byrne nails the velocity and sweet-shop wonder of Cherubino in 'Non so piu'.

Byrne reverted to Americana with Gershwin's late (1936) song 'By Strauss' which reverts, but lightly to the title as refrain and in waltz-time. Sort of. A truly assured debut, intelligently planned, presented, and sung with enormous promise.

The Brighton Guitar Quartet (Ruairir Gann, James Hartt, Simon Hopkins, Olivier Thereaux) have been a welcome and engaging, as well as quite unusually-constituted group. The works presented this time are more in the sweet spot of the collective guitar sonance.

Andrew York (b. 1958) a well-known guitar composer has written in 'Spin' a delirious, sweet-toned and attractive genre piece that's not as whirling as it might suggest, but it does spin: it's like good contemporary film-music, thrummed and individually worked-out

The Boccherini 'Introduction and Fandango' for double-cello string quintet (then arranged for guitar and string quartet) from somewhere in the 1790s is well-known from Julian Bream's guitar version. But lends itself easily to this arrangement. It's fleet too. The Introduction attractive if not biting and the fandango with the lilt and rhythm we might know from for instance the Soler piece. It's a fine transcription and just suited for this quartet.

Finally and this was the meatiest piece: Leo Brouwer (b. 1939) wrote his Toccata a while ago (before 2012) but in this transcription really sparkles. Many effects including that of percussion are deployed in this exhilarating and structurally more virtuosic piece. It revels in its textural variety, its pitches and remarkable tonal freedom within a melodic envelope. More of that, please!

Finally mezzo Pamela Cross with Shuk Yee Lu discreetly accompanying furnished a gallimaufry of songs bookended by Purcell. These were 'Secrecy's Song' from *The Fairy Queen* and from *Dido and Aeneas* the famous Lament. In the middle Handel's 'Cara sposa' from *Rinaldo* and all these were handled with warmth and a degree of seriousness. Cross enjoys the clear line and classic but florid restraint in all these. The other two, second and fourth add a dash of deeper romanticism.

Massenet's *Werther* piece 'Va! Laisse couler mes larmes' is one of those laments (literally, tears) that Cross seems at home in, with pathos and a low-lying singing line. Her Verdi piece from *Otello*, the 'Ave Maria' is again a lament before being murdered, as Desdemona says or sings her prayers, and ah here a plangent simplicity.

A good opening concert, particularly for the promise of soprano Jem Byrne.

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