

Sussex Musicians SMC Chapel Royal April 12th 2025

A gallimaufry of Spanish and English songs, interrupted by a couple of late-Romantic piano works, made for the highest new-composer count I can remember. That quantity was more remarkable in a short programme preceding the AGM. Necessarily they were short. No major pieces, with the piano works by far the longest.

Tonight a new singer Jan King with a singular programme of Spanish songs often quite obscure: which is refreshing. Accompanied by Celia Vince she began with Ruperto Chapi (1851-1909) and a song 'Mi to see figura' from his opera *El Rey qui Rabio*, all about a curiously errant king. It's a descendant of the 18th century Zarzuela tradition, light opera, tuneful and well-projected by King. My only observation is that Vince, a fine accompanist, need have no fear of playing out and is absolutely clear; whilst King need have no fear of under-projection: the acoustics here allow everything to carry, and even more modulation's allowed.

Manuel de Falla (1876-1946) as the greatest Spanish composer is far better known. His 'Jota' fourth from his *7 Canciones populares espanos*. A couple are keeping their love hidden, a very Spanish theme.

Straight away the familiar brilliance, the complex rhythms playing off against the popular seeming melody and it's greater contrasts proclaim an altogether greater mastery, tuneful as it's predecessor was. King and Vince relish the far greater interplay afforded including piano solos and King herself seems more at home in the mix of declamatory fire and sky wot if the piece.

The moderately well-known Panko Sorozabal (1897-1988) like several Spanish composers lived past 90. From earlier in his career, 1936, 'Np puede ser' from his Zarzuela *La Tabernera del Puerto*. A man reflects on his beloved being bad-mouthed as a trollop. Likewise she reflects

on the same accusations. It's a very serious song for the genre. And very fine.

Sebastian Yradier (1809-65) is from that lost couple of generations of Spanish music, though the great prodigy Arriaga was just three years his senior, dying at 20.

His famous 'La Paloma' written in 1852 is about an intermediary or chaperone between loves. Made famous by the ill-fated Archduke Maximilian who also asked for it as a last request before being shot in Mexico in 1867 (the conclusion to Napoleon III's ignominious 'Mexican Adventure'). A swaying and relatively simple piece it's also memorable, using the habanera rhythm.

Joaquin Valverde (1875-1918) died relatively young but being in the Falla generation is a more complex composer, whose early death has obscured him further. His 'Clavelitos' treats of a woman who is as much of a flirt as her lover, but is perhaps more in love. All about carnations and costing up, it dates from 1907. The popular Spanish rhythms that would inform Falla's mature music are apparent in this delirious hymn to self-recognition.

Alex Sinclair plays two contrasting late Romantic works.

Gabriel Fauré's Nocturne No. 6 in D flat major Op 63 from 1884 - once oddly recorded in Berlin by Wilhelm Kempff in 1945 - is one of the finest of the 13. In D flat with its veiled almost-said tonality, it's pure Fauré. Sinclair makes light of the complex layering and breaking out of the main theme from the ruminant textures of the underlying sound work. Troubled development and an agitated sense of the quietly passionate language informs Sinclair's more robust and explicit reading. It's hugely welcome. He handled other textures especially from higher registers in the central section as if from another world. Returning to the main theme it's as if some inner journey has reached the surface in an exhilarating reading.

Rachmaninov's 1917 Etudes Tableaux (literally Study-pictures) Op 39 - coming after the first set of Op 33 from 1911 - are harder to absorb and less popular than the Preludes; their nearest equivalent both musically and date are Debussy's Etudes from 1915. Which also come after two sets of Preludes and are equally more stringent, less popular.

There's exceptions: like the D minor Op 39/8. This rollercoaster of D minor is caught as it were in mid-flight, with terrific mobility and headlong intensity. Sinclair is entirely at home here: Rachmaninov suits him. Indeed both composers with their refractive then explosive declamations do. His control of rubato ripples through his fingers, and the sheer ruck, the w and leap of Rachmaninov's dark-hue melodies pass through his fingers. Sinclair lends to his Rachmaninov a fearless drive to the abyss. Thrilling.

Finally as we were told, a product of publisher Chappell's initiative of encouraging popular songs. It last quite a few years.

Elgar having finished his 1908 First Symphony was at a loose end. His Op 48 'Pleading' (published earlier than the symphony though) shows his gifts, not particularly of a song composer, chiselled to art song. Arthur Salmon's poem desires his beloved to 'come home from the hills of dreamland'. Sentimental stuff, but with a bedrock of a slumbering giant beneath.

Lilian Ray (the dates 1913-49 aren't quite right, it was 1876-1949) was apparently a man. John Neat also writing as Ray Lilian, wrote 53 songs as Ray - seen as more fitting sentiment for a woman! - and many more as Neat in a more serious vein. He published a lot with Francis, Day and Hunter, from 1972 a subsidiary of EMI, themselves absorbed. Dating from 1913 'The Sunshine of Your Smile' recorded by Count John McCormack and Jussi Bjorling is probably better known than those serious songs. It's an attractive lilting piece in the tradition of Lisa Lehmann and Ivor Novello. It was mind-boggling to

think this composer was born in the year if Lutoslawski and Britten, but the song was. It's naggingly memorable.

Wilfred Sanderson (1878-1935) was once hugely popular and sang at Edward VII's coronation. His ballads are typically sentimental. This one 'As I Sit Here's with words by Dena Tempest is attractive and redolent of, as Geoffrey Hill once put it of the Edwardians before World War One: "the lost delicate suitors who could sing." There's a fine peroration to close.

Eric Coates (1886-1958) at least needs little introduction. Like Rebecca Clarke born on the same day (27th August) he was a sovereign viola player whose compositions unlike Clarke's mainly focused on orchestral light music and arrangements.

Frederick Weatherly was a barrister who wrote the lyrics of over 300 songs including 'Danny Boy'. 'The Green Hills O' Somerset's rather refers to those lost delicate suitors. Coates isn't known for songs at all; so it's refreshing to hear how good he could be in the lighter vein and lower foothills of Schubert's Parnassus. It's the kind of thing Schubert occasionally set too. Consolatory rather than than lamenting the dead, it is though a curious schmaltzy way to remember the dead. Except that this is how they would have sung themselves. Fine singing and Zhanna Kemp as ever consummate as an accompanist.

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