

## **Sussex Musicians SMC Chapel Royal October 12<sup>th</sup> 2024**

This is special, commemorating the life of pianist, choral conductor educator and above all musician Muriel Hart (1924-2023) whose centenary was on April 11th and who very nearly made that landmark, dying on December 28<sup>th</sup> last.

Almost a founder of Sussex Musicians she joined at 17 in 1941 and remained active till her last year. She often led in a committee role and was active in the Brighton Fraternity too.

Interspersed with readings from her book Music - Activities in the Primary School which formed the basis of the career that ended with her MBE, the concert reflected her musical life as performer and what she actually loved playing.

John Bruzon was first alerted to Frank Bridge's Rosemary by a recording of Muriel performing it, at her funeral. As it happened he and I saw her perform it with consummate ease in 2019, 81 years after she first did in 1938. Bridge was then still alive.

Bruzon as ever offered a burnished but also sensitive reading opening out the warmth of this middle movement of Bridge's Three Pieces from 1906, often used in exams.

He finds it more intriguing than he had imagined when inspired to take it out again. Once Grade 7 it's now a Grade 8 piece. And far more layered, revealing more quirks and harmonic profundities than he ever remembers.

CPE Bach's (1714-88) genius is once again established. Just how quirky, quicksilver and stunningly original he is was brought out by flautist Beatrice Sales and pianist Kevin Allen in the second and third movements of his Flute Sonata in E major Wq 84.

The Adagio di molto goes to strange enharmonic places, and the Allegro assai really does rip, and zigzags its anxious glee to the end. Allen brought out the singular keyboard line and Sales the lyric strangeness. It's not a work I associate with Muriel but her taste was catholic, eclectic and surprising.

They then played a work modernist Allen would not necessarily take into his repertoire. It's the Aria from John Rutter's Suite Antique which has the great merit of beguiling us back to a time CPE Bach had just proved was anything but peaceful and smooth. Indeed 'restful' was how another performer described it to Allen to his amusement. Adorno talks of the disruptiveness of late style. CPE Bach proves it. Jury's out on Rutter.

John Bruzon returned to accompany Mary Thomas in two pieces which she dispatched affectingly. Michael Head's (1900-76) evocative and well-known 'Foxgloves' with its modal slips. And Giordano's Mio Caro from Fedora his second best known opera of 1898. That we were reminded, has an unexpectedly haunted core in its bel canto.

After a brief interval John Bruzon and Nicola Grunberg returned - after a reading about delight in music-making from Muriel's book - to Debussy's *Petite Suite* of 1889. It enchanted with the opening 'En Bateau' and its lapping rhythms, and the exuberantly emphatic rhythms here worked with bite and brio in the concluding 'Ballet'. Each movement in between, 'Cortege' and 'Minuet' shade into the fragile Greek world of Chansons de Bilitis, themselves confections. But the lyricism here is genuine DND a little heartbreaking.

Nicola Grunberg was joined by Sue Mileham for a series of four songs beginning and ending with two Britten folk settings. 'The Salley Gardens' and 'Polly Oliver's' are by turns elegiac with regret and warmly amatory. Mileham has always displayed wit and timing, often yes to comic effect. Here she plays mostly straight.

In between Butterworth's 'The Blacksmith' invoked that moment of British musical rediscovery including folksong, where briefly everything seemed possible. Inflected in modal harmonies and minor key colouring, it's remarkable for its pictorial brilliance and not as well known as other Butterworth settings, almost all being associated with A. E. Housman.

After that, Aaron Copland's 'Long Time Ago' seemed perfectly in place, nearer in its open harmonies to British songs than you expect. It recalls 'The Horses' though is less wide-eyed in its wonder.

Finally more flute work but this time Karen Rash took up the flute with pianist Hugh O'Neal for Poulenc's Flute Sonata of 1956.

The opening Allegro malinconico also hints elegy, from far away as Rash's flute invokes an Arcadia that seems receding over the hills. Steeped in Poulenc's long withdrawing joys of the 1920s it has energy enough to suggest that this is temporary.

Not before the Cantilena has diffused its spell and spun a lyric line mostly from the centre of the flute's and the mid-lower piano range in these soloists.

The Presto giocoso explodes like a cocktail where Rash enjoys the high trilling and exposed flute line full of dotted rhythms and much else and some scurrying piano figuration.

But it doesn't stay there, with a sudden lurch to the minor, and exposed melodic lines hinting energy. Finally Poulenc and Rash and O'Neil gather everything to a witty, emphatic not to say brattish fermata. Idiomatic and with enormous energy, the duo stepped in at 25 hours notice too; when sadly clarinetist and sax player Evelyn Harrison (whose October 2<sup>nd</sup> concert at St Nicholas I reviewed recently) suffered a fall, and was unable to perform.

With a few readings today was a fitting tribute to Muriel.Hart. Her own music-making and the works she in part enabled, and even made possible. And her words, strong, no-nonsense, piercingly direct, shine through her vigorous writing: and has continued to imprint many minds.