

**Hilary Cronin** and **Asako Ogawa**

4-5 October 2024

Bridport Arts Centre, Ilminster Arts Centre

The Dance House, Crewkerne

The catalogue of songs for the soprano voice and piano is vast and the majority of songs are of 2–3-minute duration, so that, unless the singer is performing one or more of the classic song cycles where the composer has already decided the order, then the selection and programme ordering is absolutely vital to audience enjoyment and a sense of satisfaction. This conundrum is well understood by solo singers and their pianists. How do the performers group rather disparate songs, individual narratives, and musical styles into a musical journey that has a sense of progression?

Hilary Cronin (soprano) and Asako Ogawa (piano) presented their solutions in several different ways. First, the there was a sequence of arias from Handel’s opera *Alcina.* The opera is full of passionate and lyrical arias, and this was exactly the correct choice for a winner of the London Handel International Singing Competition. It was easy to appreciate why Hilary Cronin’s voice captured the ears and minds of the judges to be awarded the winner’s prize and in addition the Audience Prize in 2021. The sound is captivating throughout the vocal range and one that is sensitively used by a very musical mind. The embellishments used by both performers seemed as natural to the vocal line and the keyboard realisations as one could wish. There was never a hint of self-indulgence.

Grouping items by a linking thread was helpful to the listeners. In the case of the Robert Schumann pieces and the Humperdinck *Hänsel und Gretel* extract, there was a real sense of continuity provided by the ‘Magical Journey’ theme. Solo piano pieces from Schumann’s *Waldszenen* (Forest Scenes) mingled with his songs concerning forests and woodlands.

Among the songs that might be grouped as tales and scenes of the ‘strange’, then Michael Head’s *The* Singer, Rebecca Clarke’s *The Seal Man*, and Jonathan Dove’s Wedding Aria from his opera *The Enchanted Pig*, three superb and contrasting songs, were delivered by the performers with well-calculated and considered amounts of musical and emotional drama.

Grateful thanks are due to Concerts in the West, just about to enter its twentieth year, and as always directed by the skilful Director, Catherine Maddocks, for bringing such a glorious voice as that of Hilary Cronin with the superb musicianship and playing of Asako Ogawa to the South-West.

Andrew Maddocks 2024