

REVIEW – Edinburgh Studio Opera Gala 2019

Edinburgh Studio Opera is a student opera society within Edinburgh University which serves to nurture Edinburgh's young opera talent, putting on two main productions a year. Last Saturday's gala performance by ESO really emphasised this commitment to bringing young people into the world of opera and art music, dispelling the idea that opera is inaccessible to the younger generation with a dynamic, enjoyable and entirely un-stuffy performance.

The programme was composed of arias, duets and trios, placed between the structural pillars of four opera choruses; ESO rightly seizing the opportunity to show off their impressive full vocal ensemble. ESO were joined by Edinburgh University Chamber Orchestra, a small but mighty ensemble who produced a wholesome and full-bodied sound, and were conducted with vitality by the exuberant Mark Rogers.

The concert opened with the overture from Rossini's *L'Italiana in Algeri* ('The Italian Girl in Algiers'). The piece develops out of a curious, quiet pizzicato opening into a comical post-classical romp; excepting a few ensemble issues the orchestra played with vibrant energy which well set the scene for a varied and joyous programme.

The quality of solo singing was in general very high, showcasing the best of Edinburgh's student opera talent. In Beethoven's 'Gott!

welch' Dunkel hier!' from *Fidelio* tenor Dan Safford navigated skilfully

between passages of fiery angst and tender hopefulness. His initial entry, a

crescendo from very quiet on the word 'Gott' was breathtakingly cool, while his

pleasantly youthful voice seemed perfect for the role of the idealistic

Florestan. Throughout the evening the soloists seemed most convincing singing

in German or Italian, and Safford's German was especially commendable.

Soprano Cara Blaikie gave a classy rendition of 'Batti, batti, o bel Masetto' from Mozart's *Don Giovanni*; showing off her rich, well projected voice and effortless high notes, with great audience communication. Similarly in the aria from Saint-Saëns' *Samson et Dalila*, 'Mon Coeur s'ouvre á ta voix', mezzo-soprano Áine Cassidy embodied the seductive Delilah with natural acting coming from genuine musicality. She had a delicate, narrow vibrato well suited to French repertoire and seemed to have notable control in the upper register – if anything I'd have liked to hear this upper register flaunted even more. In a pleasing contrast bass-baritone Ed Birchinall displayed a lovely resonant voice in 'Bella Siccome Un Angelo' from Donizetti's *Don Pasquale*, with surprising agility especially in the somewhat precarious cadenza.

The most flamboyant solo item was unquestionably the Habanera from Bizet's *Carmen*, sung by Leora Browning, a mezzo soprano with a darker tone than her mostly youthful-sounding compatriots. Although sometimes a touch underpowered she sang very confidently when supported by the chorus and was unfazed by the tricky chromatic passages – no mean feat for a student singer.

The final solo item was an arrangement for mezzo, string quartet and piano of a duet from Korngold's *The Dead City*, 'Glück, das mir verblieb'. Although a solo arrangement of a duet seems curious at first, it is an ingenious reflection of the opera's plot, based on a novel by Georges Rodenbach, where a recently-widowed man is captivated by a (living) doppelgänger of his departed wife. Multi-talented Eleanor Cozens – pianist for the rest of the concert but vocalist for the Korngold – is clearly a consummate actor and gave an engaging, self-indulgent performance reinforced by deeply expressive playing from the solo strings.

The duets and trios began with 'Pur ti Miro' from Monteverdi's *Coronation of Poppea* sung by two of the younger singers, soprano Lucy Bridgeman and mezzo-soprano Grace Moran. Unfortunately this performance was somewhat overshadowed by a fairly major timing slip-up in the second stanza which the conductor couldn't remedy – a shame as both singers showed a lot of potential, with Bridgeman in particular having a serene voice

well-suited to earlier opera.

Perhaps the most compelling performance of the evening was Offenbach's 'Belle nuit, ô nuit d'amour' from *The Tales of Hoffman*,

by soprano Claire Gilchrist and mezzo Holly Gowen, on account of the sheer

beauty of sound this talented younger pair produced. Gilchrist had a sweet tone

which seemed to perfectly complement her partner's clarinet-like warmth; any

alto would envy Gowen's sonorous low notes and if I had to pick out one voice

which truly stole the show it would be hers.

In 'Soave sia il Vento' from Mozart's *Così fan tutte* sopranos Georgina McNamara and Olivia Stevens made a seamless ensemble with baritone Fraser Robinson – the first soprano having a sincere clarity and the second a slightly less present but more colourful voice, while Robinson's lighter tone, flourishing in the higher passages, suggests he could well become a lyric baritone or even a tenor as he continues training.

For the bulk of the chorus-work the audience was treated to some of Verdi's most memorable writing. In the Witches' Chorus from *Macbeth*

Shakespeare's three sorceresses become a full female chorus in typical Verdian

overblown fashion. The balance was at times a little orchestra-heavy, and it

would have been nice to have seen fewer heads buried in copies from the chorus,

but the women astounded with their focussed sound, particularly in the lower

registers which lost no power and if anything gained a rich quality rarely heard

with younger vocalists, and impeccable diction.

The Anvil Chorus from *Il Travatore* was a ferocious tour de force for both orchestra and singers; once again the sopranos had a sparkly, coherent sound even when singing quite low, and the tenors and basses were suitably raucous. The vocal ensemble showed similar poise and polish in the and the Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves from *Nabucco* although a consistent flatness in the horns lent the piece an unintentional element of comedy.

The finale of the concert, the Easter Hymn from *Cavalleria Rusticana* by Mascagni, was a taste of things to come with ESO's production of the opera in March next year. It opens with the chorus singing the 'Regina Caeli' unaccompanied, the ESO singers making a full-bodied but unexpectedly well-blended sound that would put chamber choirs to shame. Following a petition to God by the excommunicated character Santuzza, sung with depth and purpose by soprano Ruby Downie, the piece builds to a rousing song of praise, a fitting conclusion to an uplifting gala programme.

There was something charmingly youthful and informal about the performance. The King's Hall made for a wonderfully intimate venue with a surprisingly present acoustic for an old church, enhanced by the placement of the soloists and orchestra close to the stalls. There was a slight trade-off in visibility but this was entirely worth it for the added communication between performers and audience.

An appealing diversity of vocal timbres among the singers showed they are – quite rightly – unafraid to sing with their natural voices. The consistent energy of the programme, moving swiftly between styles, meant there was no lull in the audience's concentration and when I left the venue I was thoroughly surprised to find I had been sat for nearly one and a half hours. £6 for a student ticket seemed great value to hear some of the city's younger vocal talent, and it was heartening to see that the audience was predominantly young people – but the combined high standard of singing and overwhelming positivity of the company makes me certain this was a truly uplifting experience for audience and performers alike.

ESO's next opera will be Mascagni's Cavalleria Rusticana in March 2020. For details of the performance and more visit www.edinburghstudioopera.org



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