

DAILY TELEGRAPH

The marvellous Leeds Lieder makes the Arts Council look foolish – plus the best of June’s classical concerts

Rewarding as ever, the annual art-song festival has long won converts through its sheer quality – and yet, ACE has pulled all its funding

By [Ivan Hewett](#) 16 June 2023 • 12:27pm

Leeds Lieder, Leeds Conservatoire ★★★★★

Now in its 19th year, this excellent festival has grown from three concerts over a weekend to 36 events over nine days, plus a year-round programme of concerts and events. It wins converts to the apparently rarified and “difficult” genre of art-song among people who might never normally encounter it: schoolchildren, disabled people, ex-offenders. This miracle the festival achieves by following one simple rule: don’t assume something has to be made more palatable to be accessible. Offer the best performers singing the greatest songs from yesterday and today, and the rest will follow.

The Arts Council of England, alas, does not agree. Having supported the festival handsomely for years, it has just decided that festival director Joseph Middleton’s artistic programme is not sufficiently “data-driven” and has cut its grant by 100 per cent. Make of that what you will. In the meantime this year’s festival – possibly the past – has brought joy to thousands.

I missed the first event on Thursday, a lunchtime programme of Vaughan Williams songs from tenor Nick Pritchard and musicians from Opera North, but I was present for the public masterclass given later by famed soprano Joan Rodgers. It’s the kind of event you’d think would interest only art-song nerds, but in fact to witness fine young singers led gently to discover new ways of feeling and thinking about a song is moving on a purely human level. You behold someone becoming more confident and aware, before your very eyes.

The feeling of enlarged, radiant humanity that art song can bestow was revealed even more vividly in the evening concert, from soprano Kate Royal and mezzo-soprano Christine Rice. The two singers were interestingly contrasted, Rice more burnished and clear in sound and more “sassy” and worldly-wise in person, Royal more silky and smooth of voice and somehow more apt for moments of quiet disillusion and heartbreak. It’s a contrast they put to good use in duet songs by Schumann and Brahms, which were sometimes extravagantly tragic, sometimes amusing, as in Brahms’s entertainingly vicious song about the two sisters who are devoted to each other – until they fall for the same man.

Finally came a set of Kurt Weill songs, shared between the two. The wry disillusion of Christine Rice in Nanna’s Lied, a song about a young courtesan, was touching, but it was Kate Royal’s desperate yearning for a land of lost content in Youvali that really wrung the heart. **IH**

Festival continues until Saturday; leedslieder.org.uk