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James Newby / Joseph Middleton review – Leeds Lieder fights for its existence with a beautiful recital

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by [Melanie Eskenazi](#)

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A superb Song Festival draws an enthusiastic audience to hear one of today's leading baritones.

Recitals such as this one bring the famed quality of London's Wigmore Hall to the North. Sadly, Leeds Lieder has lost its Arts Council funding, which might mean no more Lieder recitals, although one suspects that this devoted audience may well be digging deep to keep them going – but it certainly means no more of the festival's superb outreach work, participated in by hundreds of children and adults, and no more of its live streaming, which brought the concerts to a much wider audience than is able to travel to Leeds.

Obviously the knowledge of what has happened made this season especially treasured, and in this recital we were treated to an example of a true song partnership, with the London trained, Hanover resident baritone [James Newby](#) and the festival's director, [Joseph Middleton](#). The latter is well known as a superb accompanist, but if you have yet to hear James Newby, he might best be described as being in the [Florian Boesch](#) mould rather than the [Christian Gerhaher](#) – that is to say, although completely his own man, he tends towards the openly expressive and deeply involved rather than the silkily impartial.

Newby and Middleton are the first artists we've come across who perform Britten's Folk Song Arrangements as they were conceived by the composer; he did not see them as naive effusions but as art songs, and here they were given their full due. His setting of Thomas Moore's poem 'The Last Rose of Summer' was sung and played with admirable restraint, absent of cloying sentimentality and yet all the more moving for it.

Beethoven's 'Maigesang' similarly respected the composer's wishes; it's marked 'Allegro' but you'd never know it from some interpretations, which offer it at a cradle song pace. Here it was bursting with life and joy, singer and pianist relishing the unbridled enthusiasm of poet and composer.

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An die ferne Geliebte was performed with genuine drama: it's easy to forget that the work is the narrative of a disappointed lover, concluding in the realization that only through his poems can he be united with his distant beloved. Newby and Middleton brought out all the ecstasy and torment of the work, culminating in a heartbreaking 'Nimm' sie hin den diese Lieder'.

A trio of Mahler songs provided evidence of Newby's versatility, the grimness and desolation of the deserter who hears an Alphorn and is so overcome with homesickness that he swims back to his native land so finely delineated, and the cruel nature of war brought out in singing of great power and playing of great intensity.

Judith Bingham's *Casanova in Lockdown* tells the story of the notorious adventurer's escape from prison: it was narrated with real humour and aplomb.

Schubert's 'Der Wanderer' was the star of the final group; this classic statement of Romantic isolation is one of Schubert's greatest songs, and it was given an ideal performance here; singer and pianist caressed the lovely C-sharp minor melody at its centre and gave the tremulously hurried 'Wo bist du, mein geliebtes Land' just the right anxious phrasing.

A superb recital from a young baritone and accompanist at the height of their game. Come along on Saturday to hear the same pianist with [Simon Keenlyside](#) in *Winterreise*.

• A crowdfunding site has been set up to help ensure the future of Leeds Lieder. Please help if you can [here](#).