

# Leeds Lieder festival review – from inner city to international, world-class music making

French soprano Véronique Gens offered a masterclass in elegance with Austrian airs from Felix Gygli alongside buzzy song-poetry pairings from the festival's young artists



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Thu 15 Jun 2023 12.37 BST

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n paper, Leeds Lieder has everything a levelling up-minded

government might desire. Where else could you hear one of the greatest living exponents of French song back-to-back with the winner of this year's Kathleen Ferrier awards, while celebrating the people of Leeds in a dozen newly minted songs performed by up-and-coming young singers? And yet Arts Council England has rejected their latest project funding application – approximately one fifth of the company's annual budget – leaving director Joseph Middleton and his team, many of whom are volunteers, crowdfunding to ensure next year's festival can take place. As for the art on offer, it's world-class. UK recitals by *Véronique Gens* are incredibly rare, let alone opportunities to hear the incandescent French soprano in an intimate studio environment. Her ear-ravishing programme was immaculately crafted. Gens' voice has taken on a mellow, oaky quality as she has matured, though the upper-middle register retains its refulgence. Opening with Gounod's faux-folk song *Où voulez-vous aller?* and journeying through nocturnal musings by Chausson and Hahn to floral bouquets by Fauré, this was a masterclass in elegance, restraint and the fine art of communication. A captivatingly playful bond with her accomplished pianist Susan Manoff was the icing on the cake.

Compare that with Felix Gygli's enjoyable programme taking in a century of Austrian song from Schubert to Korngold. With his beefy instrument, the Swiss baritone makes a glorious noise, though he might trust the words to do more of the heavy lifting currently assigned to face and physique. Still, the line is beautifully supported, and he was especially engaging in the artful naiveties of Wolf's *Mörike Lieder*. Korean pianist JongSun Woo offered poetic and characterful support throughout.



Glorious ... Felix Gygli (right) and JongSun Woo at the Leeds Lieder festival. Photograph: Linden Shots

Finally, what do you get if you speed-date composers from northern colleges with local poets? The answer is *A Leeds Songbook*, an inspiring portrait of the city and its inhabitants across the centuries. The atmosphere was relaxed but the buzz was electric as Leeds Lieder's young artists put these often-fiendish songs across with considerable pluck. Contrived pairings have the potential to result in "carnage", as Middleton reflected after the event, yet it was remarkable how robust the showing was on this occasion.

Musical styles ranged from spiky atonality and pentatonic impressionism to borrowings from jazz and cabaret, while the poetry applauded everyone from friends and life partners to the political chutzpah of a local suffragette. Tomos Jones and Emma Storr's tribute to keep-fit trainer Michelle, who helped people through lockdown, was exacting, while Obe Vermeulen and John Streatfield's rap-infused salute to Leeds-born Man City midfielder Calvin Phillips was an anarchic delight. Middleton was in tears at the end; frankly, so was half the audience. ACE – sadly not in attendance – please take note.