

James Newby review — a master of lieder triumphs in Leeds

The Venue, Leeds Conservatoire

[Neil Fisher](#)

Thursday June 15 2023, 12.00pm, The Times

Music



The baritone James Newby and pianist Joseph Middleton

LINDENSHOTS

★★★★★

Now in its 19th year, and under the dynamic direction of the pianist Joseph Middleton since 2014, the Leeds Lieder festival has brought musical riches to Yorkshire through star performers, engaging new commissions and bold educational projects. This week the festival paired 12 budding Leeds poets (one a former prisoner) with 20 young composers to create a “Leeds songbook”.

And yet, in the topsy-turvy world of Arts Council England, this creativity and cultural levelling up counts for little. The quango recently informed Leeds Lieder that it was withdrawing its subsidy altogether. This festival may end up being the last unless there is a reprieve.

Lieder is considered a rarefied pursuit. Yet when it’s delivered with the disarming openness of the Leicester-raised, Hanover-based baritone James Newby it feels like the most direct form of expression there is. For a centrepiece recital of the festival Newby and Middleton brought a transfixing programme that the pair have been touring across Europe, a cycle of songs loosely connected by themes of distance and loss.

Bookmarked by consolatory Britten, the songs slice deeply into solitary pain, and sometimes Newby seemed so immersed it was almost painful to watch. Never to listen too, though: he has a wonderfully mellifluous tone, which he can deploy in a confessional whisper or an anguished cry. Beethoven's *An die ferne Geliebte* took on tragic dimensions the short cycle normally doesn't span. A Mahler set, the darkest depths of the evening, featured a savage, haunting *Revelge* and the redemptive glimmer of *Urlicht*.

At the quirkier end there was Judith Bingham's *Casanova in Lockdown* — a chance for Newby's cheekier side to show in a short scena premiered last year, featuring the Venetian lothario not involved in seduction but escaping from the clink. It's not without a flick of bittersweet emotion, though, as Casanova directly addresses us: "The wind will alter, the tide will turn." In other words, keep bugging on.

Earlier in the day the young Swiss baritone Felix Gygli, fresh from his victory at the Kathleen Ferrier awards, delivered a lunchtime recital (★★★★☆) heavy on talismanic repertoire. He and the pianist JongSun Woo were best in a selection of Hugo Wolf, where the singer brought fresh, even goofy energy to tragicomic tales. Elsewhere he was stiffer, as if his reverence for Schubert or Mahler was getting in the way of his connection with the audience.

Festival continues to June 17, leedslieder.org.uk