

“ REVIEW

Schubert’s songs brought stirringly and scintillatingly to life, plus the best of April’s classical and jazz concerts

★★★★★

Soprano Nikola Hillebrand and baritone Roderick Williams led the way at Leeds Lieder, a marvellously un-stuffy celebration of art song

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Nikola Hillebrand at the Leeds Lieder festival

Leeds Lieder, Leeds Conservatoire ★★★★★

Song is the Cinderella of classical music genres, adored to distraction by its fans but regarded by many as formal and remote, a matter of over-emotional singers pretending to be lovelorn shepherds while dressed in penguin suits.

There are no penguin suits at Leeds Lieder, the annual festival of “art song” in Leeds which has just started its 20th-anniversary season. Under the direction of pianist Joseph Middleton, it triumphantly proves the doubters wrong, with a programme that reaches thousands, including school-children and students at Leeds Conservatoire, which hosts the concerts. The variety of song this year – as every year – is immense, from the cabaret impertinences of Erik Satie to songs in Bengali to the heartlands of Romantic song. And the artists come from all over Europe and beyond, turning Leeds into a paradise of polyglot musical emotion.

For its first day, the festival offered a survey of classical song’s greatest figure, Franz Schubert, across three concerts. We heard more than two dozen songs, replete with the favourite imagery of the Romantic poets Schubert loved: starry nights prompting thoughts of a distant beloved, stormy seas, joy at spring’s return, and the happiness of simple good times over a glass of wine.

Mirroring the incredible variety of the songs was the intriguing variety of performers. The second concert featured no less than nine excellent pairs of young singers and pianists, each chosen by video audition from conservatoires in the UK and all round the world. In between their performances the great scholar of song Richard Stokes showed how the genius in the poetry was illuminated by the genius in the music. It was moving to hear so much talent in the bud – you could warm to the feeling on display, while also sensing in many cases that it wasn’t yet fully ripe.


With the day’s two star singers, German soprano Nikola Hillebrand and British baritone Roderick Williams, those feelings burgeoned with wonderful naturalness, thanks in no small part to the sympathetic and intelligent accompaniment from Middleton and Roger Vignoles. The singers turned out to be interestingly contrasted, in a way that shed a bright light on the composer. Hillebrand has a voice of lovely pearly delicacy, a perfect control of the lyrical line, and a way of making heavy German syllables seem light. It was exactly right for those songs such as Berta’s Song in the Night when the body seems laid in a trance, and the spirit flies aloft.

Williams doesn’t make such a perfectly honed sound, but his alertness to every word helped him bring out the earth-bound humanity of Schubert. We could feel the romping good humour of In the Spring, and that heart-stopping moment in The Wanderer when the lonely traveller thinks about the happy scenes taking place in his home village – but without him. Seeing those two wonderful artists side-by-side, we could span the whole of Schubert, from spiritual heights to homely intimacies – and realise they’re separated by only a hair’s-breadth. **IH**

Festival continues until 21 April, with all concerts streamed live, and many available for 60 days: leedslieder.org.uk


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