

## **It Doesn't Get Any Better Than This!**

2013 is the centenary of the Taunton & Somerset Music, Drama and Dance Festival, a long title and a long and distinguished history. Five years ago, Guy Robinson, a well known and greatly respected local singer, suggested a Somerset Song Prize competition. The centenary year seemed too good an opportunity to miss - to cut a long story short, it has happened and what a stunning event it turned out to be.

A few decades ago, the idea that Leeds of all places would become the host of what is now one of the world's most prestigious piano competitions seemed laughable – so don't laugh, after what we have just seen in Taunton, there's every chance that the Somerset Prize competition could become a major musical event in the future.

Last Saturday, seventeen young singers were heard in Temple Methodist Church in the first round of the competition. The panel was a distinguished one, comprising members whose combined contribution to music in our county is stunning in its scope and worth – Brian Cresswell, Linda Marshall Cole, Hilary Marshall and Lorna Anderson. While some of the competitors had brought their own accompanists, the bulk of that day's accompanying was performed with great skill and aplomb by Liz Hayley, another of the county's great musical assets. It was a long day, but a very rewarding one – the talent on display was truly formidable, and whittling down to five finalists must have been a daunting and at times difficult task. The only disappointment was the sad lack of audience for the day – larger numbers would have heightened the sense of occasion.

Although they did not make it through to the final, I must pay great tribute to own home-grown entrants, Josie Cresswell, Isobel Evans, Michael Collins and Claire Barnett-Jones– all four gave their all, and entertained us with very creditable and highly enjoyable performances.

Next day was the final, in the Music Room at the Castle Hotel. The panel of judges was augmented by Diana Rees (President of the Festival), Ian Burnside, world famous

accompanist and broadcaster, and the jewel in Taunton's musical crown, the incomparable Elizabeth Watts. What a line up!

Claire Lees (soprano) opened the proceedings, grabbing our attention from the first bar of Britten's 'Let the Florid Music Praise'. Her diction was not perfect, but her phrasing and breath control were very fine. I loved the way she floated the end of the Faure Nocturne and her rendering of Rossini's 'La Pastorella della Alpi' was a joy – fine articulation, no scooping of the wide leaps – a great start to the day.

Next up was James Hall, counter tenor. Actually I heard very little of tenor timbre in his voice, rather he is a true male alto. Britten's 'I know a Bank' gave us the first hint of how effectively James can express the moods of a piece of music, with his voice, his face and his body language. Throughout his session he drew us, the audience, into his world and the world of the music. I felt the hairs on my neck stand up during Schubert's 'Death and the Maiden' – very scary! He might just have overdone the very mannered diction slightly in a few places, but the adrenaline must have been flowing – his beautifully expressive 'Sally Gardens' was the highlight of a very compelling performance.

Jessica Eccleston (mezzo) has a very fine voice, but at times I found it better to close my eyes and let the sound do the work – her facial expressions were a bit exaggerated for my taste. Starting with Britten's 'Phaedra' was very brave – it's fiendishly difficult and I wonder if by putting so much into her very fine performance she might have sowed the seed of fatigue later. She sang Tchaikovsky's 'None but the Lonely Heart' with great power and passion. Elgar's 'The Swimmer' from the 'Sea Pictures' is another monster sing, and she did lose a bit of precision in places. Her final item, Frank Bridge's 'Love Went a-Riding' was very jolly and the loud applause she got was well-deserved.

After a break, we heard Pablo Strong (tenor). His programme had the greatest number of separate pieces, covering a very broad musical canvas. I liked his diction and well-controlled phrasing – his breath control in Faure's 'Notre Amour' was an object lesson. As his performance went on however, I started to look for variations in tonal colour and changes in dynamics but found them lacking. He has a fine voice, but his session sounded more like

a well-rehearsed music lesson rather than a public performance. His best piece was Britten's 'O Waly Waly' – I found that really enjoyable.

Finally we heard Helen Stanley (mezzo) – wow! A voice of great power which demanded instant attention. She injected huge dollops of passion into her performance – Alfven's 'Jag kysser din hvita hand' (I Kiss your White Hand) I'd only ever heard on a CD by Anne Sofie von Otter, but Helen's performance was a towering one. My main criticism of Helen, is that she didn't tailor her performance to the salon environment - at times she could have filled the New York Met, and her intensity in her final item, Mahler's 'Das Irdische Leben' was almost overpowering. A performer to watch out for in the future.

Congratulations once more to Liz Hayley for her masterful accompaniment throughout the day.

The adjudicators took themselves off, we took the air and/or whatever beverages we fancied and then we had a fascinating question and answer session with Ian Burnside. Guy Robinson has some thoughtfully prepared questions to get the ball rolling, and some of the views expressed from both sides were quite controversial. The parlous state of musical education, the death of the concert as we know it (!), the true nature of the partnership between accompanist and singer were all debated, with equal amounts of scholarship and humour. This was a most enjoyable and enlightening session.

Then – THE RESULTS!

There will always be disagreements in such situations, but this time, I think the rapport between the judging panel and the general audience was a good one. Third prize went to Claire Lees, second prize to Helen Stanley.

The winner, by a clear margin was James Hall – speaking to the judges afterwards, they all said what I'm sure most of us already felt. James does not just have a magnificent voice, he is first and foremost a performer, with the power to take the audience by the scruff of the neck and pull them right inside the music with him. We'll be hearing a lot more of James,

(and not just because Peter Lewis of 'Music on the Quantocks' nabbed him immediately for a concert in the near future!) This young man is going to be great.

Grateful thanks are also due Lentell's, Chartered Accountants for their sponsorship of this event and their involvement in making it such a great success.

Talking of magnificent voices and compelling performers, the evening ended in a truly breath-taking way. Elizabeth Watts and Ian Burnside presented a wonderful recital of English song - here, in Taunton, for us, the privileged few! It was a marvellous end to a great day, and Elizabeth showed exactly why she is now one of the world's most sought after performers in opera and lieder. Her ability to communicate the meaning, the soul of the songs built on a flawless vocal technique made this a magical conclusion to the day.

I believe that the success of this first foray into the world of song contests may presage a repeat, perhaps in a couple of years. I can't wait – this one went so well, the whole idea deserves wide publicity, commitment from organisers, the public, potential sponsors and all the other musical organisations in our county. We have a chance to put Somerset on the country's musical map – don't let's waste it.

**Harold Mead**

**28/05/2013**