

Going for a song

Antonia Couling reports on the semi-finals and final of this year's Wigmore Song Competition

What a great competition this is. The intelligent balance of requisites – songs in at least three languages and a programme of 20 minutes each – with freedom to choose from such a wide, international repertoire, leads to one of the most varied collections of performances in competition that I have ever witnessed.

Nonetheless, it's a tall order for these young singers, particularly as the standard at this year's competition was very high. From 150 entrants, 34 were accepted into the preliminaries, which, after two days, was whittled down to 12 at the semi-final. And it's a tough crowd to perform in front of. On the one hand there are 400-odd highly knowledgeable members of the audience, who listen in reverence, in a totally still atmosphere in which it's hard to gauge how successfully you're putting yourself across; and on top of that there's a jury made up of the likes of Thomas Allen, Iain Burnside, Anne Evans, Wolfgang Holzmaier, Anneke Hogenstijn (Director of Programming at the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam), Graham Johnson, Ann Murray and Margaret Price, as well as Wigmore Hall Chairman John Gilhooly and competition sponsor Dr Ralph Kohn. No pressure then.

So much of the successful performance of this repertoire is informed by experience – of performance but also of life. The most frequent crime – or shall we say mistake – is to inject too much earnestness in place of true understanding and empathy with the meaning – a kind of ersatz fervour. Those that connect intelligently and genuinely with text and music stand out like skyscrapers on the horizon. With opera there are a certain amount of dramatic devices that one can call into play to make up for any lacking areas in one's performance. This is not ideal, of course, but it's possible to mask certain imperfections. With Lieder there's nowhere to hide. And it's not just a question of having 'it' either – that ever-elusive star quality. After all, Simon Keenlyside on the opera stage is a very different animal from the one on the concert platform. So what ARE we looking for here?

I would pin it down to communication and vocal beauty. The baritone **Gerard Collett**, who was the only one of my preferred four who didn't make it through to the final, possessed all the right components. Everything about him displayed a desire to impart the meaning and beauty of what he was singing to his audience. His tone was beautiful, especially mid-range, and he engaged wonderfully with what he was singing, with crystal-clear diction. He was also relaxed on stage. In Ravel's 'Chanson Romanesque' from *Don Quichotte à Dulcinée*, he displayed the full use of power and oomph in his voice; his wit and acting ability were brought to the fore in the clever choice of Barber's 'Solitary Hotel'. My only gripe was that he took Schubert's 'Wandlers Nachtlied' a little too slow. But I would pay money to hear this chap in concert. And I was puzzled that he did not make it through.

Three of the four who *did* also had my vote. From the outset, American soprano **Erin Morley** was a cut above. She possesses an



easy, easy tone – very focused, with stunning control, full range of colour, beautifully spun notes and pianissimi. As a member of the Metropolitan Young Artist Programme, she was clearly bringing her experience on the opera stage to bear with open expression, ease on the platform and dramatic engagement with sometimes difficult repertoire (Barber's 'Sea-snatch' in particular). In Schubert's 'Delphine' we were treated to some wonderful ringing high notes at full volume – there was nothing shrill about this soprano.

African-American bass-baritone **Sidney Outlaw** was very popular with the audience, eliciting the first cheers. And no wonder. He possesses that rare, very rich operatic almost bass-baritone (although he doesn't class himself as such), with an ease of volume and resonance. The voice is focused and doesn't rumble as is often a tendency with this voice-type. He was engaged with text and music with a tempered passion, and injected lightness and colour as necessary. His 'Silent Noon' by Vaughan Williams was very good. I felt, however, that there's still a little unlocked potential with this voice. With the right coaching and some

more experience I feel he could work on lowering his centre slightly to achieve full utilisation of vocal power.

And then there was British baritone **Benedict Nelson**. He came on last, after the audience had already been sitting through almost six hours of singing. But, boy, was he worth the wait. He stood, as they say, and sang. This consummate baritone (very reminiscent of a young Thomas Allen) has a voice which, all by itself, is full of drama of exactly the appropriate force. In his opening number, 'Erlkönig', he created an atmosphere that was truly chilling at 'Mein Vater, mein Vater'. In Poulenc's 'C', he revealed the deep intelligence of his approach, and throughout his programme you could HEAR EVERY WORD. It's rare that you suspend your critical analysis in a competition, but I did here. From his bio one can also see that he has a fair few roles on professional stages under his belt, so, at 26, his career seems to be on the right trajectory, in my book.

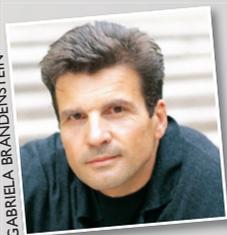
As to the fourth choice, perhaps he was having a bad day and the judges' decision was based on the preliminaries (which I did not attend). My notes for British baritone **Marcus Farnsworth** were not as favourable.

The final was buzzing with excitement, due mainly to the high calibre of those taking part. **Marcus Farnsworth** went first, presenting a mainly serious programme. Overall he impressed me more than in the semi-final, but I still heard too much pushing at full volume and his immaturity and lack of charisma bothered me – in Strauss's 'Gefunden', despite very good diction, he could have been singing the telephone directory. In Loewe's 'Hinkende Jamben', there was a whisper of more charisma and he displayed a pleasant lower range in Poulenc's 'Invocation aux parques'.

Soprano **Erin Morley** began with two humorous Musorgsky songs in which she showed real affinity for this kind of repertoire. There followed Poulenc's 'Two Songs from *Fiançailles pour rire*', and then a rendition of Rossini's 'La fiorala fiorentina' which afforded her the opportunity to display wonderful coloratura and breath-taking high notes. After all the fun and pyrotechnics, she settled down into a serious second half of her programme of Schumann, Mozart and Rachmaninov, which cleverly showed that she wasn't a one-dimensional pony, if you see what I mean. Nonetheless, I feared her programme might have been too 'operatic' for this competition.

Benedict Nelson's programme was pretty sombre throughout which was a shame in view of the drama and wit he had displayed in the semis, but, on the other hand, showed how mature this young singer is in voice and approach, and I certainly didn't feel the need for any light relief. After Quilter's 'Fair House of Joy', two Britten settings of Blake, and a Fauré, he was most refined in Debussy's 'La mort des amants', although he was slightly stretched in his higher range. There followed a Duparc, a Mahler, and Schumann's 'Die alten, bösen Lieder'.

American **Sidney Outlaw** went for a strange mixture of programme, from Duparc's 'Le galop', two Brahms Lieder, to Erlikönig (which he rather over-dramatised), to Fauré and then three American numbers by Copland, Wayne Oquin and a spiritual arranged by Hall Johnson. Despite a lot of work needed on his German and French pronunciation, there's no doubting this singer's charisma and vocal potential but I feared that he was too showy for this competition.



GABRIELA BRANDENSTEIN

Jury-member Wolfgang Holzmaier: 'The real thing about a good Lieder singer or song singer is to be able to tell a story to the audience so that the audience believe it in that moment'

And so to the deliberation. The Jean Meikle Prize for a Duo went to the British/South African pairing of my choice for the finals, **Gerard Collett** and his pianist **James Baillieu** (who also won the pianist's prize). Fourth prize went to **Sidney Outlaw**, third prize (to audible gasps around the auditorium) to **Erin Morley**, second prize (more gasps) to **Benedict Nelson** and first prize to **Marcus Farnsworth**.

I spoke to baritone and jury-member Wolfgang Holzmaier during the after-show reception about exactly what the judges were looking for in this competition – a singer, a Lieder singer or a singer of

song? 'A singer of song,' he tells me, 'Me, personally, I'm looking more for a Lieder singer. But in general it's a song competition, and that means German, French, English song. The goal is to have somebody who is interesting enough to an audience to be able to sing a full recital in this hall – without being too showy. This is why the otherwise fantastic American bass-baritone only received the fourth place, because he is more showy.'

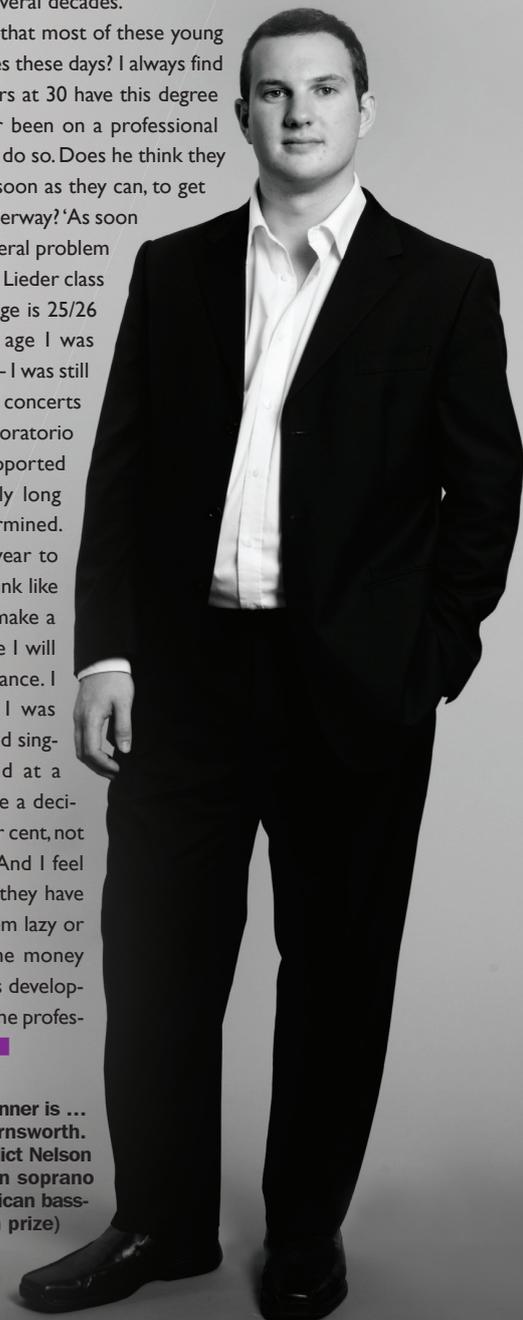
I point out the difficulty for singers in this competition because of the maturity needed for this repertoire, and if choosing from the full song repertoire, as two of them did, for pieces that best suited them and showed off their voices – worked against them? 'You know I think this is a contradiction: "best suited them and showed off their voices". Because best suited, in my opinion, means emotionally not vocally. The real thing about a good Lieder singer or song singer is to be able to tell a story to the audience so that the audience believe it in that moment. In this respect I found that the first two were the best story-tellers of the night.' And should this be done only with the voice? With minimal movement – or with what comes naturally to the singer? 'Exactly. There is no rule. With my singing I move my hands and there is movement, but there is no choreography – it's just what

comes naturally. But I know that some jury members hate this.'

Is it not a little bit of a contradiction in the competition though, because if you do include all song and someone chooses a spiritual or a Rossini, how can you not follow that through with actions and so on? 'You are right. But then we come to another issue and that is the programme. Why did singers choose a certain programme? And in that choice are they consistent? Is it just a group of songs or could it possibly mean something? For example, the first prize-winner and the second prize-winner had programmes that made sense. The third and fourth had a variety of different styles which didn't belong together.' So you are criticising their choice of programme? 'Not quite criticising but I am at least paying attention to it.' Are they told beforehand that they need to consider those things – the programme and movement? 'They are told that the programme will also be judged by the jury.'

As to performing in front of the knowledgeable Wigmore audience, Holzmaier reveals: 'As a singer, a Liederabend is the biggest challenge you can have!' At least, I point out, the audience has come specifically to hear him perform if he gives a recital. 'Yes, but it is a great challenge – because the more the audience comes for you, the greater the pressure. I wouldn't say it's easy to reach the top, but to stay at a high level, that's the real challenge in our profession. That's why someone like Domingo or Fischer-Dieskau are so amazing – they maintain the height over several decades.'

In view of that does he think that most of these young singers spend too long in colleges these days? I always find it frustrating that so many singers at 30 have this degree and that degree but have never been on a professional stage – and are still not ready to do so. Does he think they should try to get on a stage as soon as they can, to get their performing experience underway? 'As soon as they can! ... It might be a general problem with the youth of today. I teach a Lieder class in Salzburg – and the average age is 25/26 and that's rather late. At that age I was already having my first concerts – I was still a student but I was doing some concerts and had made some money with oratorio and today young people are supported by their parents for a relatively long period. And they are less determined. They think "It's OK if I take a year to make a decision", and I didn't think like that – I would think I have to make a decision *now*, because otherwise I will be too old or I will miss my chance. I studied economics and while I was studying economics I also studied singing. I was already working and at a certain point I had to really take a decision: what to do one hundred per cent, not 50. And I chose to be a singer. And I feel that the youth today don't feel they have to make a decision. It makes them lazy or they don't think: Where will the money come from? Or what time does development in the profession need? In the profession, not *outside*, as a student.' ■



And the winner is ... British baritone Marcus Farnsworth. Opposite: British baritone Benedict Nelson (second prize); American soprano Erin Morley (third prize) and American bass-baritone Sidney Outlaw (fourth prize)