

About *time*

Historically, song cycles have been the preserve of male composers. Soprano Ruby Hughes is redressing that balance with a series of newly commissioned vocal music by women, including a world premiere at this year's Leeds Lieder festival



Above: Ruby Hughes with pianist and regular artistic collaborator Joseph Middleton, artistic director of Leeds Lieder

It is comforting to think that we have made significant progress in attitudes since Samuel Johnson's adapted dictum, 'Sir, a woman's composing is like a dog walking on his hind legs. It is not done well, but you are surprised to find it done at all.' But, to quote another saying, you cannot manage what you don't measure – and some recent data makes for troubling viewing. The Donne Foundation found that only 747 out of the 14,747 compositions scheduled by 100 orchestras throughout the 2020/21 season were composed by women – a total of five per cent. Out of 4,857 performances, 4,301 didn't represent female composers at all. These statistics make a strong case for positive discrimination. It's something that preoccupies soprano Ruby Hughes: her latest recording for BIS includes new works by Helen Grime and she's about to premiere a song cycle by Deborah Pritchard at this year's Leeds Lieder festival.

'I was introduced to Deborah's music through [pianist] Julius Drake and [cellist] Natalie Clein,'

says Hughes, 'I heard *Storm Song*, which is a setting of words by Jeanette Winterson and I was instantly drawn to her palette. Her music is very detailed and accessible; exploring tritones and expressionism. I hear shades of the Second Viennese School too; those composers really speak to me. Deborah's melodies are particularly lyrical, dramatic and beautiful.' *The World* uses text by Henry Vaughan, exploring space, time and the transcendental. Creating new song cycles is important to Leeds Lieder; the festival has also commissioned work by Hannah Kendall, Mark Simpson, Cheryl Frances-Hoad and others.

The World will be programmed alongside songs by Errollyn Wallen and the lesser-heard piano transcription of Mahler's 'Der Abschied' (from *Das Lied von der Erde*). 'What really interests me is the reconciliation of past and present in music,' says Hughes, 'and I just love working with composers. Some of my best friends are collaborative composers who I have worked with in the past. I feel contemporary music is a big part of what I do.' There's a short pause before she adds, cautiously: 'I don't have a preference for collaborating with women over men or anyone else.'

We both glance towards the elephant in the room. Hughes doesn't particularly want to be known as 'the soprano who commissions women composers' any more than I want to be 'that opera journalist who writes about gender equality'. Most composers want to be known as composers, not 'women composers'. Siphoning off musicians under various labels will not be helpful in the long run. But, as mentioned earlier, this type of action and discussion is currently one of the key ways of enacting change. Practical support is essential, as the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire discovered too late. A press release (and now deleted Tweet) proudly reported that the perspective of women would be examined through opera and theatre as part of the Spring season of events. Sadly, as many colleagues pointed out via social media, the creative teams were overwhelming male. 'This is your 2022 reminder to maybe not centre your International Women's Day programme marketing

around an opera “about women written by a... guy”,’ advised one commentator.

Hughes is speaking to me from South London, where she has spent most of her life. After graduating as a cellist from the Guildhall School of Music in London, she went on to study voice at the Hochschule für Musik und Theater, Munich and the Royal College of Music. Having sung major roles with English National Opera, Garsington Opera, The Opera Group, Music Theatre Wales and Scottish Opera, for the past few years she has focused on song, regularly collaborating with pianist Joseph Middleton. In 2018 the duo premiered Helen Grime’s *Bright Travellers*, a set of five poems by Fiona Benson charting the interior and exterior worlds of pregnancy and motherhood. The work is the centrepiece to their latest album *Songs for New Life and Love*, which features works by Ives and Mahler, including *Kindertotenlieder*, in which the poet Friedrich Rückert pours out his pain as a grieving father.

‘Both Joe [Middleton] and I have been inspired by parenthood [Hughes has a son, to whom the Ives lullaby on the recording is dedicated] – we wanted to examine childhood and parenthood with a 21st-century perspective.’ As you might expect from a movement borne out of German Romanticism, Lieder are often concerned with love and loss (as in Schubert’s *Die schöne Müllerin*), country life (Finzi’s *By Footpath and Stile*) and adventure (Ralph Vaughan Williams’ *Songs of Travel*) but not many examine issues affecting women’s lives (*pace* Schumann who provides the exception not the rule in *Frauenliebe und -Leben*). ‘Helen’s work [*Bright Travellers*] is the first that deals with all the elements of parenthood – the intense joy, but also grief and sadness,’ says Hughes. ‘It is an honest portrayal of that process. It’s fascinating to have a song about what it feels like to breastfeed; the sensation of the milk coming in – it’s beautiful and vulnerable. It brings this topic into the light. Everyone can relate to these poems, whether they are parents or not. It’s a universal subject matter.’ *Gramophone* magazine selected *Songs for New Life and Love* (BIS2468) as one of its Discs of the Year.

Hughes is beating a path for other singers. At the latest instalment of the Oxford Lieder Festival, soprano Samantha Crawford and pianist Lana Bode premiered *Crossing Faultlines*, a new song cycle by composer Charlotte Bray and poet Nicki Jackowska that explores women’s experiences in the workplace. Experiences that, just like everyone else’s, deserve to be more positive. **ON**

The Dawn of Time, featuring the world premiere of Deborah Pritchard’s *The World* takes place on 29 April in the Howard Assembly Rooms at 10pm as part of this year’s Leeds Lieder festival from 28 April to 1 May. www.leedslieder.org.uk

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