

A Night of Celebrations

A large, and entranced, audience, went to listen to Keswick Music Society's presentation of Wild Art's Opera Evening at the Theatre on the Lake on Saturday.

Wild Art's opening concert for the season, this was also their 'First Night' to celebrate the glad news received, just two days earlier, that the government had accepted them as a charity - the salvation of so many artistic institutions after the recent performance drought. For Keswick, triumphantly, it was the first time a Music Society concert had been hosted by the Theatre by the Lake since Covid. And the evening more than lived up to the occasion.

Orlando Jopling, the Musical Director, orchestrated the whole operatic evening for the accompaniment of a first-class quintet. Since the music they performed ranged through thirteen composers, seven nationalities and four centuries, this was no mean feat. Basically, Jopling told the audience, featuring his favourite opera moments, he held them together by following the sketch of an operatic plot about 'the dance of love', and, appropriately, welcomed the audience to the feast with a dance, an exuberant performance of a Tchaikovsky Polonaise.

Then the excellent tenor, Richard Dowling, introduced himself and some enchanting Purcell, by entering, singing, from the mid-theatre door before he strolled to the stage. Followed by Mozart's wonderful aria Dove Sono from The Marriage of Figaro, quite gloriously sung by the Soprano, Jenny Stafford, and the audience had become, and remained, emotionally engrossed. Four Italian pieces followed, and we revelled in the mastery of the beautifully balanced performances of the tenor and soprano in two duets. The second, Donizetti, duet, was joined by the baritone, Alistair Ollerenshaw, whose moving performance of Britten's 'Look' from Billy Budd and Rogers and Hammerstein's 'If I loved you' in the second half was another triumph.

By then we had reached composers with either one or both feet in the twentieth century and opened with Cole Porter's famed 'I hate Men' which gave full scope to the acting skills of mezzo soprano, Martha Jones. She followed with the angry 'Anita' in Bernstein's 'A boy like that', from Westside Story but, after the soaring purity of the soprano 'Maria's' song, lost her anger and became part of the transcendental finale.

The final two company numbers, the first again from West Side Story, the second Sondheim's 'The Little Things You Do Together' left everyone buzzing. And the perfect ensemble performance of the quite tricky Sondheim – for instance the consistently exact timing of 'that...makes...perfect...relationships' - underlined the professional skill and profound musicality on show throughout the evening. Qualities which had long before allayed any doubts the audience might have brought with them about the concept of 'opera highlights'.

Philippa Harrison