

James Gilchrist & Anna Tilbrook - Ivor Gurney Hall, Sunday 13 October 2019

Two-and-a-half years ago, tenor James Gilchrist sang for us in the Chapter House at Gloucester Cathedral. There, he performed a new work by the renowned composer and Gloucester Music Society patron, Ian Venables. It was a profound piece based on the poetry of World War One, which many in the audience found intensely moving – James' performance brought a tear to the eye and a lump to the throat. However, he had little time to prepare for that recital, as the singer who had been booked had to pull out.

And it was Gilchrist to the rescue on this occasion too! The concert had been billed as for tenor and piano with string quartet. However, the Fitzwilliam Quartet became indisposed very late in the day, so the programme had to be hastily rearranged for just the two performers. But once again, James presented professionalism on every level – as did Anna.

The pair opened with Purcell's 'Evening Hymn' and 'Music for a While' – two fine examples of the composer's ear for a 'good tune' over a ground bass, together with his mastery of piquant harmony. Then came Three Songs by John Ireland based on the poetry of Rupert Brooke. The words were powerful in themselves, but Ireland's music imbued them with additional meaning and pathos, reminiscent of the atmosphere we experienced during that Chapter House concert. Yet the improved acoustic of the Ivor Gurney Hall enabled us to hear James' enunciation that much more clearly – his voice filling the space to thrilling and spine-tingling effect.

'On Wenlock Edge' was one survivor from the original programme. However, the version we heard today was Vaughan Williams' own arrangement for tenor and piano, rather than the more familiar version with string quartet. As James himself pointed out, the subtle differences in the scoring made for a more intimate listening experience. The overall mood of the song cycle lost nothing by this though. James' voice ranged from hushed, soft utterances to defiant declamations, while the influence of Ravel shone through in much of the piano writing. Indeed, Anna Tilbrook never put a foot wrong all afternoon with her perfectly judged and immaculately executed piano accompaniment throughout every piece.

After the interval, James sang the 'Three Sitwell Songs' from William Walton's 'Facade', rather than delivering them in sprechstimme. He preferred them that way and, judging by the audience reaction, so did we. Then came another of Ralph Vaughan Williams' masterworks – the 'Songs of Travel', a cycle of ten songs based on the poetry of Robert Louis Stevenson. They are, indeed, a tour de force, especially when delivered with such passion and panache as was given to them by James Gilchrist and Anna Tilbrook today.

The encore, 'Sleep' by Ivor Gurney with words by John Fletcher, came by special request, and was a fitting conclusion to this remarkable recital.