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FAIR ORIANA

7-8 July 2023

Bridport Arts Centre, Ilminster Arts Centre

The Dance House, Crewkerne

This imaginative mix of music from England’s ‘Golden Age of Music’ with 21st-century contributions from composers, Fraser Wilson and Louise Duggan, was titled “The Trials and Triumphs of Oriana”. The name Oriana has a close association with Thomas Morley’s published collection of madrigals in 1601 and may have possibly been a tribute to Queen Elizabeth I. ‘Fair Oriana’ are two sopranos, Penelope Appleyard and Angela Hicks. For this mini-tour they performed with the lutenist, Sam Brown and Harry Buckoke, viola da gamba. The programme was an exploration of the public and private personas of the Tudor Queen through a series of songs, movement, instrumental music, and the monarch’s own poetry. The performance of ‘Trials and Triumphs of Oriana’, largely of music by the well-known English composers of the period – Dowland, Byrd, Morley, Wilbye – with the lesser-known names too – Mundy, Hume, Milton – was a carefully crafted theatrical presentation. Using symbolic gesture, dance movement, stance and furniture, the musicians sought to convey the intimate and emotional aspects of Elizabeth’s persona from the confident and public Queen addressing her troops at Tilbury to the anguished soul over suitors and marriage.

There were many magical moments during the performances. The opening pieces were a new commission based on psalm 118 by Fraser Wilson (1984 - ) with a memorable lute part, and John Dowland’s evocative Pavane, “Mr Dowland’s Midnight”. Later Sam Brown was to give us a wonderful pastoral aura in William Byrd’s “The Woods so wild”. The more melancholic atmosphere of the troubled Queen was secured with the anonymously composed “Fortune my foe”. There followed a mix of pieces with mercurial emotions.

The sheer melodic wonder of John Dowland's songs is spine tingling when sung with the attractiveness of Penelope Appleyard’s radiant voice. The vocal sound of Angela Hicks Is one of warmth and a palette of subtle colours. Dowland’s “Time stands still”, “Dear if you change”, “Go Crystal tears”, and John Wilbye’s “The Lady Oriana” were just several examples of their persuasiveness. The Thomas Morley duets and William Cornysh’s “Ah Robyn” were excellent with the latter fading to a silence and a spellbound audience. Of the contemporary settings, “On Monsieur’s Departure” by Fraser Wilson for solo voice and lute strongly suggested that there are songwriters with the same capacity as Dowland to move the listener with sublimity.

This was a programme notable for its performers’ care and attention to structure, presentation and detail.

Andrew Maddocks 2023