

Love songs in Temple Church: Brahms and Schumann

Brahms *Liebeslieder Walzer*, Schumann *Spanisches Liebeslieder*; Gemma Summerfield, Fleur Barron, James Way, Julien van Mellaerts, James Drake, Stacey Bartsch; Temple Song at Temple Church Reviewed by Robert Hugill on 14 February 2019 Star rating: 3.5 (★★★½)

### **Brahms and Schumann love songs for Valentine's Day, in the grand setting of Temple Church**

To celebrate Valentine's Day (14 February 2019), [Temple Music Foundation](#) presented a programme of love songs at [Temple Church](#), with [Gemma Summerfield](#) (soprano), [Fleur Barron](#) (mezzo-soprano), [James Way](#) (tenor), [Julien van Mellaerts](#) (baritone), [Julius Drake](#) and [Stacey Bartsch](#) (piano) in Brahms' *Liebeslieder Op.52* and *Neue Liebeslieder Op.65*, and Schumann's *Spanische Liebeslieder Op.138*. Whilst Schumann's cycle, written in 1849, is often seen as one of the inspirations for Brahms' two sets of waltzes (1869 and 1875), the sets are rather different with Brahms creating a sequence of waltzes mainly for an ensemble of four voices, and Schumann effectively writing a song-cycle for multiple voices with all four coming only at the end.

Brahms love song waltzes are remarkably good tempered, there is little anguish here and Richard Stokes in his article in the programme book suggests that one of their inspirations was Brahms 'timid but intense' love for Clara Schumann's daughter Julie (who went on to become engaged to someone else later in 1869). Whilst Brahms would develop great admiration for the waltzes of Johann Strauss II (the two became friends later in the 1870s and Brahms would write a counter-melody for one of Strauss' waltzes), the inspiration for the *Liebeslieder Walzer* is closer to Schubert's *Ländler* (a folk dance which was an early predecessor of the waltz), 20 of which Brahms arranged for piano duet.

Whilst the Op.52 *Liebeslieder* were still in manuscript they were performed as piano duets (without voices) at Clara Schumann's, and with voices at the conductor Hermann Levi's, and Brahms himself was undecided as to how to describe them, ultimately the Op.52 set would be published as *Waltzes for piano, four hands (and optional voices)*. Whilst later performances have expanded the vocal contribution to a choir, an ensemble of four voices seems more in keeping with the work's domestic origins. For all the brilliance of Brahms' writing, these are songs to be sung round the parlour piano.

It was perhaps unfortunate that the concert was presented in the rich acoustic of Temple Church, rather than in the more intimate surroundings of Middle Temple Hall.

The location necessitated a larger-scale performance from the four young singers, and instead of a quasi-domestic vocal ensemble gather around the piano we had strongly sung dramatic moments when sometimes the songs veered towards the positively operatic as in *Ein dunkeler Schacht is Liebe*. Many of the movements for vocal quartet were strongly sung and vividly projected, but there was something a little too full on about the performance and I wanted it to be more intimate. The quieter songs made the most effect, and also those where we had fewer voices such as the shapely melancholy of the soprano solo *Wohl*

*schonheit bewandt* or the suave tenor/baritone duet *Sieh, wie ist die Welt klar*.

There was also the issue of vibrato, which I admit is a very personal preference, but for me the stronger sung vocal quartets became more about the contrasts between the four singers vibrato than about the music itself. Individual voices worked well, but with a vocal quartet I wanted something a little less highly projected, and more intimate with a better sense of blend.

This contrast was highlighted with the performance of the Schumann, which sat at the centre of the programme spread around the interval (with Brahms *Neue Liebeslieder* bringing things to a close). Schumann was writing a lieder sequence, a follow-up to his *Spanische Liederspiel* (and in fact two of the *Spanische Liebeslieder* are discarded items from the earlier sequence). So we have two movements without voices, a solo for each soloist and two duets. The result allowed individual voices to project, each in their own inimitable fashion, within the lively Temple Church acoustic and the result was far more satisfactory and allowed us to appreciate the artistry of the young singers.

Schumann was at pains to introduce Spanish elements into the music so that the two movements for piano duet alone had fascinating Spanish rhythms in them, without veering into caricature territory. Gemma Summerfield brought a lovely lyric melancholy to her solo, whilst mezzo-soprano Fleur Barron was clearly channelling Carmen in hers, albeit in a quietly thoughtful way, displaying a lovely dark mezzo-soprano voice. Tenor James Way was wonderfully characterful in his solo, with rich, dark tones to his voice, whilst the lovely melody of Julien van Mellaerts solo was the closest we came to the idiom of the Brahms waltzes. The tenor/baritone duet was completely delightful, whilst the soprano/mezzo-soprano was surprisingly complex, with the work's rather sober vocal quartet bringing up the rear.

We finished with Brahms' later set of waltzes, perhaps slightly more serious in intent and here with a greater variety of vocal combinations including a sequence of solos which again allowed more individuality from the voices. The final, rather serious quartet which sets Goethe brought things to a beautifully blended end. But that was not the end and one of the earlier Brahms waltzes, with the young singers giving us a delightfully unbuttoned version which made me wish that the whole performance had been a bit looser and a bit less serious.

Throughout, Julius Drake and Stacey Bartsch accompanied and partnered in finely elegant fashion, producing some lovely trceries of sound, though just occasionally I did wonder whether Brahms' waltzes might have benefited from a touch of vulgarity, the sense that these were originally folk-pieces designed for the parlour or the salon.