

### Cleveland Chamber Music Society: Ian Bostridge in “Songs of the Great War” (April 21)

by Daniel Hathaway



Can anyone really say they *enjoyed* Ian Bostridge’s *Songs of the Great War* program at Plymouth Church on Tuesday evening? The subject matter was unsettling, and Bostridge, who is as much an actor as a singer, went to extraordinary lengths to put the power of the poetry and music across, assisted by pianist Wenwen Du. *Profoundly moved* would far better describe the experience of hearing this performance of war-related verse set by Gustav Mahler, Rudi Stephan, George Butterworth, Kurt Weill and Benjamin Britten.

The concert was the final event in the Cleveland Chamber Music Society’s 65th season. In his opening remarks, the British tenor explained that only two of the works on the program were directly related to World War I — the Stephan and the Butterworth songs, whose composers died of snipers’ bullets in that conflict. The rest of the pieces dealt with the subject of war and its horrific toll on humanity in several generations: the Boer War, the American Civil War, World War II, and by extension, events both before and beyond.

The Stephan and Butterworth songs don’t even mention the word “war.” Stephan’s *Ich will der singen ein Hohelied* sets half a dozen texts by Gertrude Emily von Schlieben (a.k.a. Gerda von Robertus) that mimic the sensual poetry of *The Song of Songs* (or *Song of Solomon*). The six songs from Butterworth’s *A Shropshire Lad* are based on epigrammatic poetry by A.E. Housman published in 1896. In spite of its wistful pessimism, Housman’s *A Shropshire Lad* became so widely popular, Bostridge said, that soldiers carried copies in their pockets when they went off to fight in The Great War.

Stephan and Butterworth provided the most lyrical opportunities for Ian Bostridge, and he sang them beautifully — with exquisite expression in the more exotically-harmonized

German songs, and with nuanced simplicity in the English set, where Butterworth matches Housman's poetry with understated music of great sophistication.

Elsewhere, Bostridge could be said to have declaimed songs more than merely sang them. His tone, gestures and curious body language — leaning in and out, grasping at the side rail of the piano, wildly contorting his facial expressions — all served to mirror the emotional texts from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, and the poetry by Walt Whitman and William Soutar that Mahler, Weill and Britten set to music. At times, he angrily spat out words and clipped off musical phrases.

Often Bostridge intentionally paralleled ugly poetic images with unattractive vocal sounds, effects that Wenwen Du handily translated to the piano. By the end of Tuesday's concert, you found yourself wishing that Ian Bostridge could have added some poetic material that would allow him to sing a few beautifully-shaped phrases without investing the music with such moment-to-moment import.

But that wasn't what this concert was about. At the end of the Britten set, which deals with the effects of war on children from the point of view of a pacifist poet and a pacifist composer, Bostridge took a long moment of silence to stare into the piano and into the audience.

When the applause finally erupted, long and ardent, Bostridge and Du offered up two encores. The first, a hearty English sailor's song by Haydn, seemed shockingly discordant. The second was by Ivor Gurney, who suffered shell-shock in The Great War. *Sleep* was a welcome, lyrical anodyne with text by the Elizabethan poet John Fletcher. Bostridge sang it soothingly.

Come, Sleep, and with thy sweet deceiving  
Lock me in delight awhile;  
Let some pleasing dream beguile  
All my fancies; that from thence  
I may feel an influence  
All my powers of care bereaving!

Though but a shadow, but a sliding,  
Let me know some little joy!  
We that suffer long annoy  
Are contented with a thought  
Through an idle fancy wrought:  
O let my joys have some abiding  
O let my joys have some abiding.

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