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Terfel appeal wows LA audience in compelling recital tour performance.



**RECITAL
BRYN TERFEL
LOS ANGELES OPERA
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By: Carol Jean Delmar
OperaOnline.us

No, we didn't sing along with Mitch Miller on Sunday night, April 20, in the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, but we did hum along with bass-baritone Bryn Terfel – at his request, of course.

Terfel's recital for Los Angeles Opera began as a tug of war between artist and audience, but ended up a love fest.

I've encountered the problem with many American audiences before: When a group of songs is listed on a program together, the artist expects to sing each cycle without applause until the end. But let's face it, American audiences are a generous lot and want to show their appreciation by applauding after every number.

Terfel sang some of English composer John Ireland's seafaring art songs, but stopped short to educate us on song-cycle etiquette. Most of us tried to oblige, but there were some slow learners in the bunch. As the evening progressed, he discovered exactly what to do to resolve the problem, and only a master artist could have done this: He used his body tension and language to hold the audience at the completion of every number, so we just sat there afraid to move. It was at the end of his beautiful rendition of Ralph Vaughan Williams' "Silent Noon" that he told us with his very quiet-spoken Welsh dialect: "You can breathe between songs now." He'd won us over and we were hooked.

I won't list everything he sang. The first half of his program was devoted to English fare: the songs of John Ireland, Peter Warlock and Frederick Keel to poems by John Masefield; then the music of Ralph Vaughan Williams and Roger Quilter. After intermission, he switched gears and gave us Handel, Mozart, Schubert and Fauré, then concluded with what was categorized as "Songs from the Celtic Isles" – actually from Ireland, Scotland and Wales. He went into the audience and serenaded some very surprised ladies with "Deh vieni alla finestra" from Mozart's "Don Giovanni," which made everyone smile. Then he jumped back onstage to sing Alma Bazel Androsso's moving spiritual, "If I Can Help Somebody," which almost moved me to tears.

A true Welshman, Terfel excelled when singing "Cariad cyntaf" and "Ar Hyd y Nôs." We quickly learned where lies his soul. In fact, he hosts the annual Faenol Festival each August in North Wales, which is a joyful coming together of people from all over the world who gather for good old-fashioned food, wine and music – not just opera, but pop as well.

He is not just your ordinary opera singer. He is a star. And part of the phenomenon results from his ability to sing opera, Lieder, art songs and crossover music with equal precision. First off, his speaking and singing voice are technically flawless and resonant, without tension in the throat or jaw, and he knows when to add support. Thus he can sing light or dark at will and slide from forté to pianissimo, or into falsetto, so that every tone sounds natural and easy to deliver. This naturalness enables him to move effortlessly from opera to Broadway to crossover: from Don Giovanni to Curly in "Oklahoma."

Many opera singers can never breach the gap, even though they speak English and are American, because they sing musical theater songs as if they were arias, with diva-esque mannerisms and affected diction – sort of what acting students call "theater diction," only in this case, "opera diction." It's true that in order to produce ringing operatic tones, the sounds of vowels and consonants often become distorted in the name of vocal brilliance, and rightfully so. But to sing lighter fare in English, pronunciation is of major significance. It has to be accurate, words have to flow out of the singer's mouth effortlessly, and that is what Bryn Terfel excels at. He knows when to enunciate his

consonants with bite: the “t” in “sweet,” for example, in “The Bells of San Marie.” His attention to tempo and rhythm were flawless. His pianissimo at the end of “Mother Carey” held us spellbound.

No matter what language Terfel delivered, he captured the culture of the music at hand. After intermission, he showed us his coloratura capabilities with Handel’s “Sì, tra i ceppi e le ritorte” and his attention to Mozartian clarity with “Io ti lascio, o cara, addio.” A personal favorite of mine is Schubert’s engaging “Heidenröslein,” which he sang with sensitivity and delicacy, and who can resist the melodic “An Silvia” and solemnity of “Litanei auf das Fest Allerseelen (‘‘Litany for the Feast of All Souls’’), which he sang with elegant phrasing.

Terfel has a dynamic voice which he colors with ease. He is a true storyteller of song if there ever was one. He has stage presence and acting prowess. And his good-natured, relaxed personality endears him to his audience.

He was accompanied by renowned pianist Malcolm Martineau who anticipated his every move and displayed masterful technique and artistry.

Just one last wish though: I hope that Terfel will return to L.A., and will include more arias and Lieder in his next program. Or wouldn’t a duet concert with Cecilia Bartoli be wonderful? Just dreaming . . .