

CARTE BLANCHE

As he celebrates ten years as the Director of Leeds Lieder, **Joseph Middleton** talks to **James Jolly** about his passion for song and bringing new audiences to the art form



Two decades of song in the North

The pianist Joseph Middleton, who celebrates a decade at the helm of Leeds Lieder, tells an inspiring story of the power of song from last year's festival. 'We put all of the artists up in the Radisson Blu hotel in Leeds, and the woman that we work with there had never heard of us. She'd never been to any classical gig either – ever. And she'd been a great help, so we said, "Do you want to come for free to the first night?" And she said, "Well, what is it?" And we just said, "Just come along, hear it, have a drink on us." She was probably 24, something like that. And she came to the first night – it was Mark Padmore – and she absolutely loved it, came back on the last night to see Simon Keenlyside, who she didn't know from Adam, brought her boyfriend, brought some friends, she was completely hooked.'

Song, be it art-song (Lieder, mélodie and so forth), pop or rock, jazz, folk, or all the forms of 'work songs' that people sing in remote corners of the globe, is fundamental to human existence. It speaks to us directly, it tells stories and it celebrates what it is to be alive. 'Song can teach us so much about the human condition,' Middleton agrees, 'about how to empathise, about how to look into ourselves and learn more about ourselves. So, I think it is the perfect art form for somebody coming to classical music for the very first time. And sure, a lot of the finest ones aren't in English, but a festival like ours works super-hard to overcome that by having pre-concert talks, we subtitle everything in English, we have programme notes, we have texts and translations, we encourage the artists to talk. We put out as much as we can on social media and on YouTube. The key is encouraging audiences just to try it for the very first time.' And he has other stories of song newbies reduced to tears at the experience of hearing a great singer live.

Leeds Lieder was started 20 years ago by a group of friends from Opera North, one of the cultural gems that puts the city on the musical map (along with the celebrated piano competition founded by Fanny Waterman). This group, who



Joseph Middleton, the Leeds Lieder leader

loved song – the sort of people who visit the Schubertiade at Schwarzenberg – but rather resented having to travel to London to hear song at Wigmore Hall. So, they aimed high, and enquired how much Dame Margaret Price's fee would be to give a recital in Leeds. The funds were raised, the concert given and a festival of song was launched 20 years ago. And in its early years artists like Dame Janet Baker, Barbara Bonney and Florian Boesch made the journey to Leeds. The great Dutch soprano Elly Ameling agreed to be President and the festival's reputation grew. For the first ten years (it was biennial then), each festival

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was masterminded by one of the UK's leading song-pianists: Graham Johnson, Roger Vignoles, Malcolm Martineau, Iain Burnside and Julius Drake. Then, the festival's founder, Jane Anthony, was diagnosed with terminal cancer and succumbed very quickly. Middleton had just given a concert there with Dame Ann Murray. 'They asked if I'd like to take over, which I was really thrilled to. And we decided fairly quickly to turn it into an annual event with a concert season, so that we could really bed into the cultural landscape there, and try and build audiences for song.'

'And it's grown and grown, so that now we do a nine-day-long event with 32 events

all over Leeds. We do a huge amount of education work. We've got a young artist training programme. We do lots of community outreach as well. And we do a year-round concert season as well to keep the art form alive in Leeds. So, it's changed massively in that time and one of the main changes has been the looking to the future, so it's future-proofed by having a small but a paid workforce.'

The news last year that Leeds Lieder had lost its Arts Council grant of £60,000 was met with disbelief – it fulfilled every demand expected of such an organisation, and fulfilled each superbly. When I ask about the grant for *this* year Middleton smiles and says that 'We just put in a new bid and, exactly like last year, we scored top marks the entire way through, and this year it's come good. So really, really thrilled to be having support from them again. I feel really strongly that an organisation like ours that does so much work in schools – 1000 school kids will take part in our song workshops this spring – so much work in the community with the Bring and Sing, that brings 100 artists to Leeds Minster to sing, should be supported by a body like the Arts Council.'

Song, as a universally loved form (in the pop and rock world 99 per cent of all the music is song), can, and should, cross barriers of race, creed, colour and language. And in such an ethnically diverse city as Leeds – it's the UK's fourth largest city, with sizeable Sikh, Jewish and Hindu communities – there is a large untapped audience. It's something that Middleton is actively pursuing. 'We've got Cheryl Frances-Hoad setting Punjabi proverbs for three artists that will take place in the Sikh temple in Leeds, the first time that we've ever done a gig there. And we're going to be working in collaboration with South Asian Arts UK, a really extraordinary charity in Leeds. Again, it's about audience building. It's about going to a space where our core audience probably haven't been, and I really hope that they do come. The whole point is that they will experience a new cultural exchange. Then in the



The baritone James Newby, with Joseph Middleton at the piano, a highlight of the 2023 Leeds Lieder festival, returns this year

Sikh centre, an audience that probably hasn't been to a Leeds Lieder concert will experience art song. And my hope is that exactly as happened last year, some of them will then trickle in to see Carolyn Sampson or Benjamin Appl, or somebody else.'

Middleton is also giving a concert at the Hyde Park Book Club, again a venue first for Leeds Lieder – and, as a bar and performance space, far cooler than its ironic name suggests! 'It's a venue that our audience, I'm pretty sure, won't have been to,' he explains. 'And it'll have a feeling that's much more relaxed, there'll be no printed programmes, there'll be lots of talking after we finish. There's a club night-type vibe. And we do so much work with young artists in Leeds, I want to go to them rather than keep asking them to come to us.' The singer is James Newby – and if you've never heard him live, do try; you couldn't wish for a more engaging young advocate for song. As Middleton says 'He's electric, and he's the most natural person on stage. There's no filter involved, there's no artifice. He's just him being him. Audiences can tell if somebody is not being completely honest and James has no other way to be on stage. So I think he's the ideal artist for an evening like that. And the programme that we'll do will involve Mahler, Schubert, songs like that, and then we'll go through some folk songs to songs by Sting. I've done concerts like this with James in Germany and he has a knack of explaining

to the audience in a way that's so natural and full of wonder for the repertoire, but in no way patronising or putting it on a pedestal. I'm really, really thrilled that he said yes to it.'

As well as the Frances-Hoad songs, there will be a new piece by Tansy Davies. It's all part of ensuring that the song tradition isn't just endless *Winterreisen* and *Dichterliebes* – wonderful though they are – but is very much alive. Middleton's incredibly busy schedule (when we spoke he was in the midst of a series of concerts that contained more music than most solo artists would perform in a year) also finds room for a lot of new music – in the last six months he's premiered song cycles by Errolyn Wallen, Brian Elias and John Casken (as he says, 'That stuff, there's no quick fix. That is hours and hours and hours and hours and hours of study!').

For such a passionate, yet refreshingly down-to-earth, advocate for song, Middleton is uniquely placed to answer my last question: what, for you, makes for the perfect song concert?

'OK, wow! A perfect recital involves quite a lot of individual things falling into place. So, from my point of view, the perfect recital involves a piano that is extraordinary. This idea that an accompanist doesn't need a top-notch instrument just couldn't be further from the truth. The palette of colours that we need to draw on is huge, so I need

a piano that can whisper with complete clarity, and then can roar as well – and everything between. So, you want a piano technician sitting to your left-hand side in the rehearsal who can really understand what you need. Then you need a concert hall that gives the voice some bloom, so that the singer feels really free, but that isn't too "wet" so that you can hear the words.

'You need an audience that has really come to the concert with open hearts, open souls and open ears, because you wouldn't believe the difference it makes. This is what I think is the most extraordinary thing about the world that we live in right now, which is so full of quick gratification by technology, of pleasure being drawn

from anything that's quick, anything that's not mindful. It's the exact opposite of what we do in a concert hall, where if you're going to get something out of it, you have to be mindful, you have to give over to what's happening. And if you're playing to a few hundred souls who are all there breathing at the same time, listening intently, and just observing what it's like to be part of this thread that goes from you back a couple of hundred years often, and then forward into the future, if you get all of that happening in one room, it's the most extraordinary thing.

'And then on top of that, you want to be on stage with somebody that you deeply love and respect, who is singing repertoire that is really part of their personal make-up. And that they really have spent so long with this material that it's so invested in their being. They really feel a connection with their text. And they've got a Rolls-Royce voice too! And then you hope that you also are prepared enough that you feel completely free, and then things really, really fly. That's when the magic happens. But there's a lot of things that need to be in place in a particular order for the match to hit the touch-paper. But when it does it just lifts off!'

Leeds Lieder runs from April 13 to 21.

All headline recitals and masterclasses will be available to livestream via the Leeds Lieder website - leedslieder.org.uk - where you can also find full information about this year's programme.