

Pianist & Coach

An Interview with Clare McCaldin

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Preparations for the [André Tchaikowsky](#) Symposium at Leeds College is well underway. The day's programme has been typed and proofread. I have met with Sebastian Müller and Alfia Nakipbekova for a rehearsal of the *Trio Notturmo*. The Piano Sonata (1958) is kept on the go.

Great excitement and inspiration ensued when mezzo-soprano Clare McCaldin and I met for the first time yesterday for a read through of the songs as well as getting to know each other. Our rehearsal was interspersed with laughter, incredulous looks at the score (which often give contrasting time signatures to both voice and piano) and moments of achievement where we were able to already “make music” this early in our collaborative game.

As Clare has a personal connection to André Tchaikowsky, I decided to interview her as this was one of the reasons of her agreeing to taking part in the project. However, as Clare was only a little girl when André was in her family home she shared an email her mother had sent to help put together the pieces of the jigsaw:

“We don't think [Clare] will have any strong memories of André, as he didn't usually appear until after [she] had gone to school because he always meditated first thing in the morning! I think this was how he coped with anxieties from the war years. [Clare was] only 4 when he first came and so [she] would only have seen him briefly at teatime, and I don't think [she] would have gone to any of his rehearsals... I think one of the reasons we all became such friends was that he was [Clare's] Dad's very first artist in Oct. 1971 and his agent was worried about him staying with a family who had small children and animals! He arrived on our doorstep, where I think [Clare] greeted him because I was getting tea, and when I

got to the door he held out a big bottle of whisky under his arm and announced “I’ve brought this because my agent says I’m difficult”!!

He never was difficult with us – only charming and very interesting – and he stayed with us on the 3 or 4 subsequent occasions he played in Lancaster, becoming a really valued musical friend. In the 1980s, when the University sector suffered it’s first financial difficulties, André was the only musician who offered to give a recital for expenses only – and I think that was at the time that he had cut his own performing down to only 6 months of the year so that he could concentrate on composition.”

Clare continues: I do remember him being very twinkly and talking constantly – I think he loved to philosophise and just chew on ideas – my impression was that my parents often couldn’t get him to go to bed, or only just got him onto his train in time because of some conversation they were having, but whether this is actual memory or an impression formed by subsequent conversations with my parents, I can’t quite tell.

NdV: How do you find the cycle of sonnets? Are they well-written for the voice?

CM: The cycle is wonderful. You can tell that the composer is primarily a pianist, simply from the range of colours and textures that he creates in the piano part, but he doesn’t neglect the voice and there are lots of opportunities for the singer to find variety and expression through the words. Of course there are places where I think he misses a trick because a word goes by too fast or at a pitch that makes it hard to inflect as much as I’d like to, but it’s pretty impressive that a native Polish speaker has got to grips with Shakespeare’s language so successfully. The vocal line is pretty muscular in places – sustaining the musical legato without losing the clarity and meaning of the words across big distances on the staff is a regular challenge in contemporary music generally and I wouldn’t say it is unusually difficult here. The pacing of the cycle is great, though, with the distribution of tempi and emotion well-judged so that there is time for audience and performers to recover between the peaks! Nice mix of text set at spoken-voice register that can be really coloured and longer phrases that encourage the singer to fill out the line and be more operatic.

I can feel André’s intellect at work here rather more than his famous sense of humour, not least because Shakespeare himself is being quite dark in these sonnets. There are places where the structure and formality of André’s compositional process are clearly discernible as he pursues an idea. But he also leaves a lot of space throughout the cycle, silence and recit to be shaped in the moment by the performers, and that is a generous way to allow each new exponent of the songs room to put something of themselves in.

NdV: When studying something so intricate, is there a certain method that you follow? If so, what is it?

CM: The intricacy of the songs is certainly an issue – not only the practicalities that we discovered this afternoon of fitting together parts written in different time signatures, but also

the aligning of key moments, rare moments of unison, taking of breaths together or turning corners into new material. All of this happens with any song but is made more difficult when the music is so complex because I don't think those moments are always felt as intuitively. They often have to be actively unearthed from inside the music and only become apparent after we can be sure that we are getting it mostly 'right' – this takes longer so we have to be more patient.

My method is a common one, I suspect – always work slowly and do the hardest bits first, gradually increasing the tempo as soon as I can be sure that I am not sacrificing accuracy. In songs like these with important rhythmic structures I also do a lot of work on that element, separately from the notes, as the notes often slot into place over the course of the rehearsal process whereas a wrong rhythm messes it up for both of us.

NdV: What impact does this cycle have on you? What are the emotions that André's settings conjure up for you?

CM: It's great to be one of only a few people to have sung these, and even more special for me that I have a personal connection with the composer. I think I would have found these songs powerful anyway, but the music and texts become richer still in relation to what we know of André's life and the facts of his premature death. Some of the sonnets are pretty dark and painful, dealing with love and loss – it's always tempting to imagine that any creative work might reflect aspects of what the composer was feeling but it's also just as likely that André chose them because they contain fantastic language and imagery.

NdV: Do you often work from handwritten manuscripts?

CM: I have been very lucky that most (younger) composers nowadays write using computer software, which is a blessing in terms of legibility, and the majority of my work has not required reading manuscript copies. It is much harder, not least because handwritten words are often so hard to decipher – I have usually ended up using Google to find the poem and compare it. Having said that, lots of errors creep into type-set scores too and it does depend on the individual – a few composers I know who write by hand have the most beautiful presentation.

Over the coming week I shall be publishing a brief post daily musing on each of the songs, including a concert recording by mezzo-soprano Margaret Cable and André Tchaikowsky.

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