

Arts Arts Reviews Music Music Reviews by David Cusworth

## Mirabilis Collective samples female composers and artists of the past millennium for Grove Classics finale

A soaring soprano rang out over a distant drone, the strains of Hildegard von Bingen's medieval paean to wisdom, *O Virtus Sapientiae*, infusing Cottesloe's Grove Library with a cathedral ambience on Sunday.

Processing alone up the aisle, Lucinda Nicholls' crystalline tone set the scene for Mirabilis Collective to promenade through female composers and artists of the past millennium.

Her cadence was a pin-drop moment, the first of many from a versatile singer who matched her style to each era and genre; a smorgasbord of possibilities for Grove Classics' winter season finale.

Baroque came next with Barbara Strozzi's *Che si puo fare?* (What can one do?) anchored in harpsichord-effect keyboard (Stephanie Nicholls) with demure flute (Hayley Scheffer) leading in more soprano magic.

A sense of innocent joy suffused voice, flute and accompaniment, with pizzicato punctuation from Elena Wittkuhn's cello waxing into full-bowed melody. The group paused briefly for reflection in soprano before chiming in tunefully for the cadence.

Adagio and Presto movements from Anna Bon di Venezia's *Sonata No. 1 in C* stayed with Baroque in fluid counterpoint across keyboard, flute and cello; easy-listening fare coalescing seamlessly to close. No one could have guessed that Scheffer was a late stand-in, leading out the Presto with confidence and verve, down to a breathless conclusion.

A trilogy of Clara Schumann's songs moved the dial to Romantic, with Lucinda Nicholls' florid tone offset by warm piano-style accompaniment in *Beim Abschied* (On Parting); lucid diction and deftly judged dynamics holding amplified and ambient sound in balance. Drama bubbled to the surface before falling back to contemplation in the close.

*Mein Stern* (My Star) gave the mother-daughter duo more licence in rumbling piano and restless soprano, with a hint of reverence in the cadence.

*Ich stand in dunkeln Traumen* (I stood darkly dreaming) carried forward the motif in mellow cello and quietly deliberate piano; Wittkuhn's timbre so close to vocal she almost sang a melody full of warmth and grace.

Closing the half, Cecile Chaminade's *Serenade aux etoiles* (Serenade to the stars) had piano and cello filling out the lower register for Scheffer to drift in, carefree and playful, drawing her colleagues along in an ebullient bagatelle, bright and breezy. Again, the late change in personnel left no trace, rocking out to the interval on a high.



Lucinda and Stephanie Nicholls, Hayley Scheffer and Elena Wittkuhn at Grove Library for Mirabilis Collective on Sunday.

A second half of contemporary works started close to home with Elena Kats-Chernin's *A Nostalgic Piece*. Yearning and longing met in lavish flute and ambling piano, morphing to a dance measure then back to fluent melody. Variations rolled out smoothly, returning to refresh in the source before going again; fading out in pathos.

Margaret Brandman's *As Blue as Turquoise Pearls* paired delicate piano with solemn cello, the contrast shaping a conversation, echoing then adapting phrases; exploring common ground in bass register then diverging in the upper reaches.

Three songs by Connie Converse brought Lucinda Nicholls back to the stage, velvet cello with flute highlights unleashing her jazz soul in *Honeybee*, inhabiting the enigmatic singer-songwriter's whimsical persona.

*Vanity of Vanities* told of snake oil and religion in the Old West, an ingenue's account brimming with wonder that had the audience rapt for a blissful instant, all too brief.

*Incommunicado* was more folkloric, yet with harmony and dramatic highs worthy of Broadway; Scheffer stretching the palette in piccolo to match a brilliant soprano shimmer, with a sting in the tail.

Cool flute in Latin jazz mode brought on Columbian Carmen Marulanda's *Gabriela*, a genre-bending pastiche of passionate phrases suddenly breaking to dazzling runs over plangent piano.

Regina Spektor's *Samson* brought mellifluous piano chimes to sustain a breathy, torch-song vocal over darkly delicious cello in a fateful tale of love gone wrong.

Closing the bill, flute led in Joni Mitchell's *Blue*; a mix of belt and ballad voice, its aching phrases complemented by quiet harmony in piano and cello with flute ornaments. One long soprano note seemed to hold an eternity of promise before fading to an irresolute cadence.

Of course there were encores.

Lucinda Nicholls took on the mantle of Kate Bush in *The Man with the Child in his Eyes*, a knowing, searing rendition that stripped away the years; the singer herself holding the child in her eyes.

At the last, Joni Mitchell's *Both Sides Now* rang down the curtain with clarity, charm and a dream-like quality enhanced by a light touch in accompaniment; a cushion for the tragic muse to lean on.

Mirabilis Collective celebrate Clara Schumann's works on August 31, 5pm, at UWA's Callaway Auditorium.