



[School of Music recitals](#), [University of Liverpool](#)

Reviewed by [Denis Joe](#) March 2011

James Greer (tenor)

Ronald Woodley (piano)

Henri Duparc *Trois Mélodies*

Francis Poulenc *Tel Jour, telle nuit: neuf melodies sur des poems de Paul Eluard*

Henri Duparc *Trois Mélodies*

There was something ingenious about the programming of this concert - 2nd March. Sandwiching Poulenc between the dark art songs of Duparc worked very well. Duparc composed little and published less. Writing

around the time of the Franco-Prussian wars, his *Mélodies* found little favour with the public, who did not appreciate the 'Wagner influences' of his work. His 17 art songs have a more sombre depth to them than those of most French composers; at times sounding more like lieder.

This would probably suggest the need for a baritone voice rather than that of a tenor, but Greer's, almost bel canto, voice maintains the seriousness of the songs. This performance actually got me to see Duparc's contribution as stretching beyond Debussy and Ravel and seemingly suggesting the move towards neo-classicism of the early part of the 20th century.

*L'invitation au voyage*, a poem by Charles Baudelaire, has an atmosphere of Schubert to it to begin with, but soon we begin to feel that we are in the more recognisable area of Debussy and Ravel. This is a great opening to the recital: an art song that recognises the impact of Wagner that would lead to the creation, two decades after Duparc's death, of school of music composition that would stretch its influence across the Channel and inform the music of composers such as Vaughan Williams. What is also immediately noticeable is the type of tenor voice that the two traditions share. Whilst British and French art song calls for the higher register of the tenor, it is not utilised in the

same manner of the Italian *bel canto*. Its seriousness seems to echo the values of the baroque period, when the higher voice suggested a closeness to God.

The next song, *La Vague et la Cloche*, reinforces that feeling and seems very much like a song from Schubert's *Der Wanderer*

. Based on a poem by François Coppée, it deals with the impact of the forces of Nature, but there is a greater (almost obscene) effect of those forces in Coppée's poem, that is brought out well by the piano and the determination of the voice, and whilst the lyrics suggest a pointlessness with life, Greer manages to convey the closing line, *Don't est fait la vie, hélas! la vie humain* with a feeling of belligerence rather than dismay.

*Soupir* certainly lives up to its title and is, unmistakably, French. The lyric, based on an early poem by Sully Prudhomme, is a bit hackneyed but many art song composers have elevated drab poetry to a higher level, and Duparc does so with this song. The restrained approach of Greer means that the words are sung, not for their meaning, but for their effect and there is no *fausse emotion* that one associates with Italian (especially, operatic) tenors. That is not to say that the work

is treated 'coldly' but we are more aware that the work is that of a singer with piano accompaniment and the emotion comes from the performance. There is such a display of vocal or pianistic dexterity in these songs, and Greer's and Woodley's delivery suggested a strong passion for the technical beauty of the songs.

While 30 years ago many critics and musicians were willing to dismiss his music as trivial or unadventurous, the opinion these days accepts Poulenc as a minor master. In no other area did Poulenc excel than in art songs, and he is now regarded as one of the greatest melodic composers of the 20th Century.

Like the Britten/Pears partnership, many of Poulenc's songs were written for the baritone Pierre Bernac including the song-cycle *Tel Jour, telle nuit*.

They lose none of their appeal when transposed for tenor. And Greer manages to bring out the playfulness of the music; creating a lighter sound but one that still maintains the gravity of the composer's intent. What advantaged Poulenc in composing art songs (as is also the case for the great American composer, Elliot Carter) was an intimacy with poetry, which allowed him to confidently set to music some of the more 'difficult' poetry, such as the work of his friend, the surrealist poet Paul Eluard.

*Tel Jour, telle nuit* is one of the greatest song cycles in the canon, and shows Poulenc at his highest level of mastery. The first thing to note is that Poulenc did not attempt to use music as reflecting any sense of Eluard's poems and thus the poetry does not so much create the song as it compliments it and visa-versa.

*Bonne journée* begins broodingly enough but we have moved on from the sombreness of the Duparc songs. Though the music seems to reflect the poetry, we sense that it is Poulenc's understanding that we are experiencing. The last verse: '*Bonne journée journée qui commença mélancolique/Noire sous les arbres verts/Mais qui soudain trempée d'aurore/M'entra dans le coeur par surprise*' could almost be a different song. The movement from a pessimistic acceptance to sheer optimism in a song lasting under three minutes would have taxed the best composer, yet Poulenc managed to capture the schizoid emotion so naturally. Performers to will not find this easy, as the emotional level is on either extreme and, although you are aware of the piano as accompanying the voice, the experience also suggests two voices saying the same thing.

*Une ruine coquille vide* is a beautiful and tender song. It allowed Greer to be more relaxed and the phrasing of each word could be savoured.

The song has a conventional feel to it, but that does not detract from its brilliance.

*Le front comme un drapeau perdu* open with on a strong, declamatory note that follows the twist and turns of Eluards word/images. Although Greer failed to follow Woodley's playing, especially on, what I consider, the most important line in the song ('*Creuse la terre sous ton ombre*') that signals a turn in the narrative, it did not cause too much harm. (The only other tenor voice I know of this cycle is the English singer, Ian Bostridge, who has a lower range to his tenor and I wonder if Greer's higher register might not have suited this particular song).



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