

JULIAN BLISS

THE TIMES

Bliss/Quentin

Recital - Wigmore Hall – 17 November 2003



JULIAN BLISS had not even taken the safety-catch off his clarinet, and already I was amazed.

Was it the sentence in his programme biography which told us that he is now studying at the Royal Academy of Music “after graduating from Indiana University with a postgraduate Artists Diploma”? Or the bits about his Japanese tour, his CD, his television series, his performances at Windsor Castle, Buckingham Palace, the Proms . . .

It isn't just his technique, though that is astonishing enough. It's the wit, poise and vivacity in his playing. In short, it is the pure intuition leading him straight to the heart of much of what he plays.

I write “much of” rather than “all”, because this Wigmore recital, with Bliss alertly accompanied by the young pianist Julien Quentin, revealed that he still has some areas to develop (thank goodness). **He can cartwheel and somersault through a whizzbang showcase such as André Messager's *Solo de concours* with insouciant ease, throwing in a riotous cadenza of supersonic arpeggios for good measure. Similarly, the wacky flutter-tonguings of Jean Françaix's exuberant 1974 *Tema con variazioni* hold no terrors for him.**

He was less persuasive in more introspective music, particularly early in the recital, when his timbre seemed a little breathy. Martinù's humdrum Clarinet Sonatina needed more interpretative fantasy to justify its inclusion. The long, lyrical lines of Schumann's *Fantasiestücke* were admirably phrased, but a creamier tone would have enhanced them further.

Fittingly, perhaps, Bliss reserved his best playing for the best work: Poulenc's 1962 Clarinet Sonata, written as a homage to the Swiss composer Arthur Honegger, but full of impish humour as well as a genuinely elegiac slow movement. Because its character shifts so suddenly and disconcertingly it is a difficult piece to sustain. Here it made complete sense.

The anguish; the anger; the violent mood swings; the determination to pursue joie de vivre no matter what — all these contrasts and contradictions were presented as if in a crazy mosaic: bracingly unreconciled, like the jumble of life itself. A blissful insight, you might say.

By RICHARD MORRISON



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