

Richard Lewis

in recital, Calgary 1963

Geoffrey Parsons



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Richard Lewis in recital
Calgary, 20 February 1963

Richard Lewis tenor
Geoffrey Parsons piano

The tracklist below is arranged by CD for the convenience of listeners who wish to convert their downloads to a permanent storage format



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CD 1		
1	Applause	0'30
	Henry Purcell (1659–1695)	
2	Incassum lesbia (The Queen's Epicedium)	8'20
	George Frideric Handel (1685–1759)	
3	War, he sang, is toil and trouble (<i>Alexander's Feast</i>)	6'00
4	Deeper and deeper still...Waft her angels (<i>Jephtha</i>)	9'04
	Henri Duparc (1848–1933)	
5	Invitation au Voyage	3'57
	Claude Debussy (1862–1918)	
6	Clair de Lune (<i>Fêtes Galantes, Set 1</i>)	3'10

mpLIVE

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LM7420

	Henri Duparc	
7	Phidylé	6'13
8	Richard Lewis	0'15
	Jacques Offenbach (1819–1880)	
9	Legend of Kleinsack (<i>Les contes d'Hoffmann</i>)	2'35
	Benjamin Britten (1913–1976)	
	On This Island (<i>W.H. Auden</i>)	
10	Let the florid music praise	3'25
11	Now the leaves are falling fast	2'17
12	Seascape	2'05
13	Nocturne	4'01
14	As it is plenty	1'53
	Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958)	
	Four Poems by Fredegond Shove	
15	The Water Mill (No.4)	3'07
16	The New Ghost (No. 3)	4'27

CD 2

	Roger Quilter (1877–1953)	
1	O Mistress mine, where are you roaming	1'44
2	Richard Lewis	0'51
	George Butterworth (1885–1916)	
3	Is my team ploughing? (<i>A Shropshire Lad</i>)	3'25
	Trad Irish, arr. Herbert Hughes (1882–1937)	
4	The Stuttering Lovers	1'44
	Ralph Vaughan Williams	
5	I will give my love an apple	2'21
	William Shield (1748–1829)	
6	The Plough Boy	2'39
7	Richard Lewis	0'12
	Georges Bizet (1838–1875)	
8	Serenade (<i>Fair Maid of Perth</i>)	3'40
9	Richard Lewis	0'10

mpLIVE

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LM7420

	Jules Massenet (1842–1912)	
10	Le Rêve (<i>Manon</i>)	4'36
11	Richard Lewis	1'07
	Rutland Boughton (1878–1960)	
12	The Fairy Song (<i>The Immortal Hour</i>)	2'26

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John Steane

February 1963, for Richard Lewis, was rather an easy month. Apart from this recital in Calgary, there were only two others. He had only to learn, and perform, one new opera (Strauss's *Intermezzo*), appear once in *The Rake's Progress* and sing in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony and Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde*. And of course there were the rehearsals. But that was (almost) nothing to the pressures of the previous month, when *Fidelio* had been followed by *Die Zauberflöte* and that by *King Priam*, with broadcasts of *The Rake's Progress* and *The Midsummer Marriage*, and *Benvenuto Cellini* at the Royal Festival Hall. There were also a few little extras such as *Das Lied* in Dublin and the Ninth in Brussels. And *Desert Island Discs*. But that's a singer's life. And even the 'easy' month of February involved a certain amount of travel – crossing the Atlantic for a start, then planes from New York to Iowa to Edmonton to Saskatoon to Calgary to Seattle to Los Angeles. No wonder his teacher, old Norman Allin, said he preferred to remain where he was.

By the 1960s British singers were no longer the stay-at-homes they had been a generation earlier. In the interwar years, the lot even of our leading singers (say, those '16 famous soloists' chosen to sing in Vaughan Williams' *Serenade to Music* for the jubilee of Sir Henry Wood) was very much to sing *Messiah* up and down the country and be ready and able to turn a hand to whatever else might be forthcoming. After the War, the international success of Kathleen Ferrier made a difference; so did the general broadening of repertoire and the proven reliability of British singers in a wide range of music.

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Nobody impressed more firmly in that respect than Lewis, the tenor from Manchester, whose career might have begun a few years earlier had it not been for the War. It probably helped that he was able to produce glowing reviews of engagements (while still in the Forces) in Brussels, and in England he won speedy recognition and welcome, first, as a natural tenor with an unusually beautiful voice. It then soon became apparent to conductors, critics and (ultimately) the public that he was that pearl of great price – a tenor who could master difficult scores, learn quickly and be relied on not to make mistakes. I myself heard him for the first time in a performance of *Peter Grimes*, on tour in Birmingham. The role seemed inseparable from the voice of Peter Pears and, to be truthful, I was by no means pre-disposed in the new tenor's favour. In those days, the opinions of the supposed *cognoscenti* (mainly record collectors specialising in the great names of old) counted for much, and they had not favoured him with even that sighing acknowledgement which is prepared to concede merit in the context of these degenerate times. I must have heard him in broadcasts and on records, but without strong reactions. 'In the flesh' what took me quite by surprise was the sheer beauty, the ingratiating purity of tone. I had learned that it was unwise to expect a voice to sound 'in the flesh' as it did on records, and had come to dread the discovery that a singer (male or female) whose voice on records had been what I called pure had in fact an upper layer of metallic overtones (which may have been simply wear).

Lewis had nothing of this. He was young, and perhaps the impurity would come later, though in my experience it never did, or only in the form of a hardening as he approached his sixties. Critics would sometimes describe the voice in those days as 'soft-grained', and I could see what they meant; but the term is misleading if it

suggests a want of effective power, a drawing-room voice or one without the penetrative thrust to withstand the power of a large orchestra. I think I came to realise how much ‘heft’ he had on first hearing him in the opening song of *Das Lied von der Erde*: the orchestral weight there, and the density of it, would seem to make it impossible for the tenor to get through, but he did. In the *Grimes* I heard, not only was the voice produced with a rare freshness and evenness, but it was genuinely pure, free of that ‘surface-scratch’ which compromises the beauty of a singer’s tone. Lewis registered with me as a less intense *Grimes* than Pears, less at one with the musical character, but more moving through the beauty of sound.

By the early 1950s he had established himself as one of the busiest, most comprehensively useful, singers in the country. In some quarters this was even thought a liability. As early as 1951, Desmond Shawe-Taylor, a fastidious critic whose temperament probably inclined him to set exclusivity above usefulness, wrote of him in a review of Glyndebourne’s *Così fan tutte* that he made ‘as good a Ferrando as could be expected from a singer who undertakes so excessive a quantity of new and difficult music per month’. That year’s undertakings included *Idomeneo*, *Don Giovanni*, *Die Zauberflöte*, *The Rake’s Progress* and *La traviata* – and that was simply in opera. And if he read Shawe-Taylor’s words, they did not deter him from more. In the following years he became so indispensable that if he was indisposed one evening the show could not go on. That certainly was the situation on *Midsummer Marriage* evenings at Covent Garden. I remember the official collecting tickets at the foot of the Amphitheatre steps having trouble with a dissatisfied customer who had discovered that, instead of the Tippett opera, it was (oh, the indignity of it!) *La bohème* that was to be given that night. After listening patiently, while everybody had to wait, the ticket man leant forward

mpLIVE

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LM7420

and said confidently: 'If you were to ask me, sir, and if you'll take my word for it, I'd say you were in luck'.

The previous year, 1954, Lewis had created the role of Troilus in Walton's *Troilus and Cressida*, and in 1961 he was to be the first Achilles in Tippett's *King Priam*. The readiness with which he learnt the music of Aron for the British premiere of Schoenberg's opera was regarded as phenomenal. And nobody, as far as I have read, raised any quibbles of the 'very-good-considering' kind about that. In fact the role provided just such a challenge as he loved.

His widow, Elizabeth Muir-Lewis, has told me that as a young man growing up in Manchester he heard two world-famous tenors, Tauber and Gigli. He admired both (and Gigli promised to hear him sing when he next returned to the city, which, however, was not to be), but Tauber became the model. Tauber's breadth of repertoire appealed to him, and the sense that in him you had a tenor who was also a musician – Tauber conducted and composed, and had a well-founded reputation as a quick study. In fact, so great was the young man's admiration that when, on the advice of his teacher, he changed his name (which was Thomas Thomas) he took his mother's maiden-name of Lewis and chose Richard as a tribute to Tauber.

Tauber's breadth of musicianship was reflected, with interest, in Lewis's own recitals. The Calgary programme is a fair sample. Opening with Purcell (Lewis had sung in revivals of *The Fairy Queen* and *King Arthur*), he went on to Handel. The recitative and aria from *Jephtha* was a regular favourite and was noted as being especially 'moving in its dignity and strength'. Here, in Calgary, he followed with a French group, where more often than would come in the second half, a selection of

mpLIVE

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Glyndebourne, 1958

LM7420

Lieder taking its place in the first. The inclusion of an operatic aria somewhere in the programme was also with him a point of honour (I remember him singing 'Recondita armonia' with excitingly full voice for an audience of schoolboys). Here the reminder of his Hoffmann clearly delighted the audience with its vivid characterisation and generously held high A natural.

The second half is devoted to British song, presenting everyone concerned (audience as well as both performers) with the challenge of a comparatively difficult large-scale modern work. In other concerts it might be Tippett's *The Heart's Assurance*; here it is Britten's *On This Island*. The audience is then rewarded with Vaughan Williams, Quilter and Butterworth, and finally with a group of folk songs. Can anybody who was present have ever forgotten the magic of that unaccompanied opening of 'I will give my love an apple'?

It is then that, with the encores, he speaks to the audience and refers to 'my excellent pianist'. With due acknowledgement of the personal impact of what he is about to say, he pays tribute to Geoffrey Parsons for playing under sad and difficult conditions: he had learnt that day of the death of his father. Geoffrey was his favourite accompanist, a musician thorough and dependable like himself, and an ideal companion on tour. He could readily have been excused for withdrawing, and Richard knew of his feelings for his father, having sung for him privately at their recent, and last, meeting. But Geoffrey, who was to be so stoical and gallant in the face of his own final illness, was not the man to let private feelings prevail over professional duty.

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The original sources are stored in the Borthwick Library at the University of York, where they are curated by Dr. Christopher Webb. Many of them are unique, irreplaceable and fragile: acetates in particular have an unpredictable shelf-life and require extremely careful handling. They are being remastered by Roger Beardsley, who has a worldwide reputation in the field, to the highest possible standard, with the emphasis kept on the feel of the live performance.

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