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Contact: A Journal for Contemporary Music (1971-1988)

<http://contactjournal.gold.ac.uk>

Citation

Hirst, Linda. 1988. 'Extending Singers'. *Contact*, 32. pp. 57-58. ISSN 0308-5066.

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Extending Singers

Jane Manning, *New Vocal Repertory: an Introduction* (London: Macmillan Press, 1986), £29.50 (hardback), £9.95 (paperback).

What an ideal situation it would be if singing-teachers in Britain were to have Jane Manning's book *New Vocal Repertory: an Introduction* and were to recommend the chosen pieces of music carefully to their students. Her enthusiasm is undimmed after more than twenty years of performing new music, and her obvious commitment to each one of the pieces she describes should be infectious enough to make singers (for whom the book is clearly intended) take note of her comments, and, if necessary, make contact with composers so as to obtain their songs, thus beginning a quest for new repertoire and an ever-widening approach to programme-planning for recitals. They would then feel a personal involvement with the music and begin to understand more about the compositional process and how vital this is to their own musical future.

The book is clear in its layout, clear in its writing and just as clear in its suggestions for programme-planning. There are no wasted words, and the musical quotations illustrate invitingly. The gradings of difficulty that are given to the chosen pieces further clarify the author's aims – to encourage performance of this music – provided that the singer has a real awareness of his or her own technical and interpretive ability. The list of works is comprehensive and impressive within its limits, and every range and type of voice is catered for. My main criticism, however, is of the discrepancy between the book's title and its contents. Indeed, until I obtained my copy I was expecting something quite different. It deals exclusively with songs for voice and piano in the English language, a very small segment of the new vocal repertory, and if it were to be these songs, as the publishers suggest, which might serve the singer as an *introduction* to contemporary vocal music, then the situation would be regrettable. Such an introduction should come well in advance of the music discussed in this book, sowing the seeds of interest and curiosity, since new music develops out of a previous generation of writing.

I may be doing singers a disservice when I lump them together as a breed and ask: Do they know about Schoenberg? About the departure from tonality? About what was going on in England in the earlier part of this century? Of Peter Warlock's life and music? When will they ask questions about *music* rather than about their voices? When will they be as curious about the composer and his or her motivation to write as about their own motivation to sing a piece? Of course I know that there are singers who are aware of these things, but I still feel that there are many more who are not. I think it unlikely that a singer unfamiliar with Britten and Tippett operas, late Stravinsky, or the Second Viennese School would even want to update his or her recitals, whereas a singer who knows a living composer or two (personally or musically) has a different outlook.

Maybe the author optimistically assumes a background knowledge in her readers which would lead them to the music on which the book focusses, but I think singers would also be interested to read of earlier pieces which they may know only slightly and might study further if encouraged. Jane Manning's descriptions of important earlier-20th-century works would make inspiring reading. Singers would love to know of her experiences performing Schoenberg, Berio, Nono, Henze, Weill or Ives, for example. There is a real need for something to be written about such earlier and more frequently-heard music, and one might perhaps hope for this in a future volume.

On the whole, better-established figures are left out of the present book, as the author feels that the composers who *are* included deserve more performances. (There are several to whom she refers as neglected.) The problem may be for young singers to choose a composer on whose work to devote their attention. This, of course, is a matter of personal taste and selection – a difficult problem for students who have been taught to be afraid of, or worse, scornful of new music in general. Jane Manning's recommendations may be sufficient as they stand, but I would have liked more information about the composers chosen, a brief word on their backgrounds beyond just birthdate and nationality. A criterion in my own choice of recital music would be familiarity with other areas of the composers' music, (though this might be hard to acquire in the case of some personalities discussed in the book). Whilst I would be happy to see such composers as Gunther Schuller, Virgil Thomson, Judith Weir and Trevor Hold, for example, included in standard recital-programmes, I am less sure about some of the others mentioned.

Taste aside, the author is always incisive and objective, as well as most effectively descriptive in her guidelines on performance, though a few more personal touches would have made for friendlier reading: she rarely refers to her own experiences of performing the songs other than to say what a pleasure she found it. Singers need to know that an artist of Jane Manning's calibre and experience can struggle with a certain section of music for some time. Certainly, if I count the hours taken to learn a particularly taxing new piece and pass this information on to students, they are relieved to hear that it didn't happen overnight, and that increased musicianship can gradually result from the learning of new and complicated songs or pieces written in unfamiliar notation.

It is in its consideration of this latter kind of music that the book is most valuable. It was, of course, Cathy Berberian who transformed composers' ideas of vocal writing from the 1950s onwards (though Bernard Rands is the only composer included who actually wrote for her). She was a pioneer in the breaking down of stylistic barriers; suddenly all the sounds a voice could make were being written down in various forms of notation, and musical use of the voice did not always depend on the *bel canto* technique. Now as composers continue to explore new areas of colour and timbre in the voice, so a vocal technique must encompass new abilities and new sounds; there must be an awareness of the relationship of voice to instruments, though always the voice must first be capable of producing a sustained and well-supported sound which can be beautiful when necessary.

Certain other technical skills are a prerequisite when following the advice given in the book, and the author's suggestions when dealing with such matters

are always direct and helpful. The discussion of David Bedford's *Come in here child*, for example, is of great practical assistance; all fears of starting the piece on a soft high B are dispelled by clear instruction, followed by the encouraging advice that once the perfect start has been achieved, no further problems occur in the opening phrase. Vocal sound-quality is also discussed in some detail here, including special effects and singing into a microphone (a vast area for discussion), and one hopes that Manning's comments may serve to encourage some adventurous young sopranos to learn this lovely piece.

But how depressing it is, as the author points out in her introduction (p.2), that singing-teachers often feel that their students are 'not advanced enough to sing modern music'. When will they be ready? Surely it should always be there alongside the standard repertoire, to be learned, got 'into the voice', and respected in exactly the same way as a Mozart aria which the student has probably heard sung by all her superiors and peers. The joy of learning a piece of new music is partly that one cannot sit for hours discussing its problems with other singers; it becomes one's own problem to solve, perhaps with the help of the composer, and the excitement of performing music that not many others have sung before should help enormously in the development of the performer's own personality. But how does a young singer, or even an experienced artist, create or develop this sense of taste without being familiar with a great deal of new music and therefore, as Jane Manning says, being able to 'indulge in intellectual or philosophical argument about their repertory' (p.2)? The author so rightly claims that of all performing-artists, singers are the least inclined to do this; surely this is because they listen to voices, and to singers, but not so frequently to *music*.

Another question which seems to merit further discussion is whether the standard 'voice and piano' recital remains a suitable medium for the presentation of new music. I see no reason why it should not, but I am sure that I have colleagues who would disagree. Perhaps the way for singers to introduce new music to their public is to include one new piece in each recital of standard repertoire, and hope that the audience's safety-curtain of prejudice will fail to come down before the piece begins.

To the extent that it at least promotes interest in the consideration of such matters, Jane Manning's book makes an excellent addition to a library, a necessary addition to the reference books of singing-teachers, and an interesting volume for singers themselves, from which they may gain an enormous amount of information, not just about the chosen music, but about performance attitudes, pacing a recital, technical and musical issues, and the ability to construct a well balanced and exciting programme for themselves. Ideally one might hope for a series of master-classes to follow it in which the author could personally guide young singers through their selected pieces, further demonstrating her conviction that delving into new repertory can be a fulfilling and exciting experience.