

PIERROT LUNAIRE QUESTIONNAIRE. *Alison's answers are in red type. 11.3.08*

How many times to date have you performed PIERROT?

none yet

Had you heard other performances/recordings?

(Please name any specific vocalists).

Yes, Jane Manning live at Kingston University in 2005, Jane on disc (her first recording); Lucy Shelton on disc in German and also in English.

Also heard a short clip on TV with Nureyev dancing to Pierrot Lunaire which was v. inspiring. Singer might have been Linda Hirst?

Roughly how long did it take you to prepare your own part?

50 hours over 11 months, spread out because I was not on any particular deadline, also because I have 4 part time music jobs to juggle., so time is tight in any one week.

Did you perform it from memory?

n/a (although I can tell you that I'd prefer to have the score there at least for the first time!!)

Where did you stand on the platform in relation to instruments/conductor?

n/a but I imagine it might work with the conductor in the middle, instrumentalists on his/her right, piano to his/her left, and me between the conductor and the piano, on the conductor's left.

Were you 'miked'?

n/a, but I would imagine that as a trained singer I should be able to be heard most of the time. There are a few occasions in Pierrot Lunaire in which it is acceptable for the voice to be almost submerged in the sound of the instrumentalists.

Was it 'staged' /in what costume/ with lighting? Any other visual effects?

n/a but I would enjoy this aspect of performance. I would like to use a theatre space and have images projected on the the screen/cyclorama behind me (have just done a recital like that, in Moffat, and it was v. successful) to create the mood of each song. I would make a Pierrot costume –black with big white buttons (or white with white buttons as in the Romantic oil paintings? Black better so we understand Pierrot's distress at No. 18 Der Mondfleck). Sensitive lighting could really help create the atmosphere. Stark bright lights for the horrid numbers, softer lighting for eg no 4 Eine Blasse Wäscherin, and spooky dark shadowy lighting for no. 8 Nacht.

Did you make movements/gestures?

n/a but in general I would gesture if I feel this would enhance my story-telling. The narrative is full of actions and descriptions from which we understand the emotions of the piece, so it's appropriate, I think, to bore the hole in Cassander's head (no. 16 Gemeinheit) , and eg. No 3 Der Dandy: When he applies his make up it's clearly asking for bold gestures onto the vocalists face. But too much would take one's attention away from the music. So I would be aiming to make every gesture count. Nothing extraneous.

re Movement, this is difficult to get right with such tricky music, as it's an additional hazard re ensemble if the singer wanders about. Also, moving around invites problems of audibility. So I'd be likely to stay put in the one space (maximising lighting possibilities in the one space too) but maybe angle myself slightly differently for different songs. This is indeed the recitalist's art, to make every song feel new, fresh and instantly characterised, while telling the whole story of the bigger piece.

What was your basic approach to the sprech-stimme, especially regarding accuracy of pitch as well as rhythm?

I learnt the exact rhythms in conjunction with the German text as most of the text is comfortably in a heightened speech rhythm. re Pitch, my basic approach was to be accurate in pitching when humming and singing through but then in context with piano in rehearsal, to let some of that go and use the shapes of the phrases to guide me somewhat.

Did you start by speaking /singing it?

I started by humming, as I would when learning any piece of any era or style: I hummed the exact pitches of each phrase to create a complete legato line which could be well supported. Thereafter I worked by singing the lines on a single vowel, then on the vowels of the text, then with the full text. Finally I developed a singy-speaky vocal sound which could move in either direction (viz: I would be able to speak it more, if that was preferred by the conductor, or to sing it more if that was preferred). I wanted to avoid a situation in rehearsal where I was asked to give more of the pitches but couldn't because I'd never really learnt them. I am aware that there is a difference between Sprechstimme and Sprechgesang

Did you read the texts in advance? Did you have to do extra work on the German or not? (Or did you do it in English? -which translation, if so)

I learned it in German, (which is a language I am comfortable speaking and singing). Just a couple of pronunciations needed correcting. I haven't mastered the really Viennese style of pronunciation but would find that fascinating.

I read the texts a lot and tried to understand what they are saying. I used my dictionary to help with unfamiliar words and also used the very helpful translations in JM's CD booklet.

I find it critical to know the exact meaning of each word so that I can find the right colour in the voice and every point in the piece – at least, that is my aim, and is an ongoing study.

Do you find the texts predominantly a) poignant b) dramatic c) disturbing d) ironic e) humorous, or a combination of these?

I find the texts a combination of dramatic, poignant, disturbing and humourous in that order (most dramatic, less poignant etc). Pierrot Lunaire is for me is a study in the psychology of a really disturbed mind, of heightened emotion caused by neurosis. But it has some lighter moments too!

I have little experience of how irony works in music. The best example that comes to mind is in Britten's opera Albert Herring. On stage Albert is being praised to the skies but the orchestra alludes by clever quoting from other works and (I think) cuckoo calls, to the fact that Albert is not actually such a pure young man.

For me (at present – I don't rule this out for when I know the work better) neither the poems nor the music of Pierrot come into this realm. I would be more likely to

acknowledge the wild and difficult emotions of Pierrot as real to him, and therefore real to us as related by Pierrot.

Do you see the work as Expressionist or ironic- satirical, or a mixture?

I have just checked out Expressionism and am delighted to say that I think Pierrot Lunaire is exactly that, pure Expressionism. The heightened emotions of the text are fused with Schoenberg's music to create a masterwork of enduring quality. We are all neurotic to a degree, and there is something in all of us which is fascinated by the way that Pierrot allows himself to give in to his emotions.

Do you conceive it, interpretatively, as a) an example of 'fin de siècle' Post-Romantic decadence. b) a sophisticated form of cabaret. c) a heightened form of dramatic declamation or d) ripe for a contemporary 'make-over'? (Other personal insights welcome!)

I conceive Pierrot Lunaire as a heightened form of dramatic declamation (c), which could certainly be given a bit of a contemporary make-over (d) (although I don't have ideas on that myself) and which belongs to its time and place, ie fin-de siècle Vienna in terms of the searching for self, understanding of the mind (Freud etc)(a). But I don't see it as decadent, only indulgent.

Which movements do/did you find most difficult a) musically b) vocally/technically c) balance-wise d) stamina-wise e) interpretatively?

a) musically: for me No 15 Heimweh presents difficulties with a constantly shifting tempo. I would need to rehearse this a lot with the instrumentalists to get this to flow well, especially if it was without conductor. Nos. 19 and 20 are hard because each bar of the slow 3 tempo has so much in it, I find it hard to keep my place.

b) vocally/technically: It took me some while to work out what I needed to do to get the right sound for Pierrot Lunaire, and this applies to the whole piece. All the songs are tricky. The hardest to crack vocally/technically was probably No. 8! [see below (d)].

c) balance-wise. This is hard to answer as I haven't done the piece with the full band.

d) stamina-wise: No 8 is the crunch as it lies uncomfortably low and doesn't move out of its small vocal range. In general I would expect to find some stamina issues with singing anything as long and as concentrated as Pierrot Lunaire, as there are few moments in the whole piece for recovery or rest of any sort. There's a fair amount of loud high stuff later in the piece which will also give me feelings of tiredness if I don't go carefully and measure what I give out.

e) interpretatively –when I was learning the dark numbers of part 2, I found myself getting dragged into the sombre moods and this didn't help me. I would have to be 'in' the music but not affected by it.

Do/did you attempt to characterise the movements individually (using different timbres?)

Yes, absolutely. Each song has its own sound world. The harlot in no. 12 Galgenlied is a harsh, brittle character, with a sound to match. Nacht (No 8) is spooky, again with a sound to match. The old lady in No. 17 Parodie is a quirky repetitive soul with an irritating sound to match! and so on...

This for me is the key to telling the story of Pierrot.

What are your favourite movements? Why?

I love the huge musical gestures of No 3 Der Dandy and enjoy the fussy-ness of No.18 Der Mondfleck. No 5 Valse is beautiful in its own way, while No 16 Serenade makes me laugh every time – it's the original viola joke. The cruelty of No 13 is quite extreme but I do enjoy it – after all, it's only in Pierrot's imagination.

Are there any individual moments of interplay with instruments that you especially relish?

It's hard to say because I don't really know the instrumental parts well enough. When I get some rehearsals with the players I will know more about this. The opening of No. 4 is very memorable for me, with such a still blank sound world. It is remarkable how this is achieved.

What aspect do you feel you need to work on further?

I would like to spend more time on shaping the work as a whole, with its 21 constituent parts individually measured to create that whole. This takes real skill and some experiments perhaps. I will also be working on the slower-moving songs to improve my sound on the long extended vowels without going into singing by mistake.

How has it affected your other work – vocally, artistically, aesthetically?

Vocally, my range has shifted slightly (to include lower tones) and I am now in the process of regaining the top of my voice. This is obviously important to me. Artistically it has opened up new areas of learning and understanding music. It is a huge challenge artistically, and one to be performed only with good preparation. I am glad to have learnt it over a long period of time without too much of a deadline. Aesthetically it has given me lots of ideas about how to express emotion in my singing of any kind of repertoire, and reminds me of the importance of colour in the voice. It raises the bar, in terms of what I expect to give in my music-making.

Have you tackled any other works involving 'heightened speech' (FAÇADE, etc.).

How did they compare?

Yes, I have given several performances recently and in 2005/6 of a song by Adam Gorb which was written for me some years before I started work on Pierrot. 'La Cloche Fêlée' contains some passages of dramatic pitched speech marked 'sprechstimme', then at the end is a section marked 'Spoken: harsh and toneless'. There is no variation of pitch within individual phrases, rather each phrase uses a differently pitched monotone but it is possible to express this effectively in the context. I am much more able to do this effectively and without fatigue now than when I was singing the Gorb a few years ago. In general I now feel more able to move from speaking to singing and vice versa. This includes singing an aria or classical song, then talking to the audience about the next piece, and singing it straight away.

In my work at the BBC I have for ages felt unprepared for the 'sprech' aspects of the pieces we sing, so I'm relieved to have cracked this. As in Pierrot, we often have to go

from one vocal production to another (eg singing to speaking/sprech) and until recently I could only bluff my way through.

Did you have a pianist/coach to help you rehearse/learn it?

Yes: two sessions with Paul Webster (piano) and Jane Manning (coaching)

Did you work on it with a voice teacher – was this helpful?

Yes, maybe 6 sessions so far with my singing teacher Marie Hayward Segal, total 3 hours so far. Marie encouraged me to sing it more, but then liked the singy-speaky vocalising that grew from it. I am grateful to her for insisting on this, as I would otherwise find it hard to be heard.

When practising/rehearsing/ performing Pierrot, did you ever experience any problems of vocal fatigue? If so, how did you address them?

Yes, my voice became tired if I failed to support my sound correctly, or gave out too much air with the singy-speaky vocalising. This is surely a real hazard to negotiate, if too much air escapes. But Jane has shown me ways of achieving even the low E flat in No 8 (Nacht) for which I am most grateful. No. 8, which lies in a small range rather low for me, is generally the hardest for me to sustain. Resting is an obvious way to allow recovery but is hardly possible in performance. So I still need to find a more relaxed way to perform this song without tiring myself.

Please add any other reflections, including how subsequent performances have affected your view of it, and how confident you feel/felt about performing it.

I am looking forward to any opportunities I may have to perform Pierrot and think it's an amazing piece.