

# Musical week of vocal delights and discoveries

BY DAVID GORDON DUKE

**REVIEW** | There's been an embarrassment of vocal riches at the Vancouver International Song Institute's inaugural festival at UBC. Festival artistic director Rena Sharon has created themed presentations, each with more than its fair share of delights and discoveries.

Monday evening's program was *The Ecstatic Path; Songs of Spirituality*. Baritone Alan Cor-

bishley and gitaist Darren Wren offered selections from John Rutter's *Shadows*, settings of Elizabethan lyrics including a charming neo-Dowland pastiche, *Close thine eyes*. Soprano Martha Guth and Erika Switzer presented a fine, stylish version of Purcell's *The Blessed Virgin's Expostulation*, as well as a spectacular reading of Ravel's incomparable *Kaddish*. Contemporary American composer John Harbison's cycle *Mirabai Songs* are a

remarkable curiosity: complex yet with an intense immediacy. Soprano Phoebe MacRae and Laura Loewen turned in a fiercely committed performance of a major work that seemed tailor-made for them. Much of VISI's focus this week is on British repertoire. Sunday evening's program showcased songs by Rebecca Clarke, Michael Tippett and Benjamin Britten.

Although festival star Graham Johnson's old-school platform

chat proved affable though hardly exceptional, he remains a co-recitalist and coach of considerable distinction, unsurpassed in the depth of his understanding of the British song repertoire. Working with Guth in early songs of Britten (to texts by W.H. Auden) and baritone Tyler Duncan in Gerald Finzi's wonderful Shakespeare settings *Let us Garlands Bring*, Johnson demonstrated suave and assured mastery.

Less affecting were Rebecca

Clarke's rather conventional settings of Yeats poems, agreeably presented by soprano Lambroula Maria Pappas and Loewen. A performance of Tippett's cantata *Boyhood's End* by tenor Benjamin Butterfield and Alison d'Amato proved unconvincing. For classical singers, the "cabaret song" repertoire is an opportunity to test storytelling skills and, on occasion, a certain level of sanctioned self-indulgence.

Last Thursday, *I'm a Stranger*

*Here Myself* provided an opportunity to hear amusing repertoire by Marc Blitzstein and David Baker, along with classic turns by Cole Porter and Noel Coward. It was a selection of William Bolcom's exemplary recent *Cabaret Songs*, exuberantly presented by the duo of Duncan and Switzer, that made the evening's deepest impression. Canada Sings is VISI's wrap-up, this evening at 7 p.m., UBC Recital Hall.

Special to The Sun