

## Helena Juntunen, Wigmore Hall, review

Helena Juntunen, singing at Wigmore Hall, doesn't have a classically beautiful voice, but she gave a riveting performance, says Ivan Hewett

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By Ivan Hewett

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Finnish soprano Helena Juntunen is hardly known in this country. But after her recital at Wigmore Hall I'm willing to bet that will change fast. It was a riveting 90 minutes, but not because we were ravished by a classically beautiful voice. On the contrary, it had a piercing intensity, especially at altitude, and a very strong colour. It was like one of those foodstuffs that has a fascinating flavour but after several forkfuls you're still not sure whether you actually like it.

But goodness what Juntunen can do with it. And what a presence she has on stage. Imagine Carmen transformed into a startling blonde, with a very winning smile but also a challenging air of "Don't mess with me", and you'll get the flavour of her. She offered an artfully chosen programme of songs that were as richly coloured and strange as her voice, beginning with some rare Schumann songs.

These showed that Juntunen has the rare gift of making a flowery 19th-century sentiment seem completely believable. She cuts through the conventional surface to the truth beneath. That wasn't so hard in a song like *Herzeleid* (Heartache), which pictures the death of Ophelia and ends with that name, here whispered with uncanny intensity. It was much more impressive in Eduard Morike's conventional little ditty about the joy of approaching spring.

The Richard Strauss songs that followed were even stranger. *Schlechtes Wetter* (Dreadful Weather) portrayed one of those scenes the poet Heine specialised in, where uncanniness and sardonic humour go together. At the mid-point, the song flips from one to the other, a startling moment which was beautifully handled by Juntunen's pianist Eveliina Kytomaki (who was terrific throughout). Juntunen caught the moment, too, while appearing not to try.

Ease and a certain sly playfulness are actually Juntunen's secrets. She's the polar opposite of a singer like Alice Coote, where risk and insecurity give everything a thrilling edge. Juntunen can invest a massive intensity in a word or moment, and return immediately to relaxed normality.

That's what made her so apt for Thomas Ades's *Life Story*, a setting of Tennessee Williams's amusingly sardonic scenario about the dangers of lighting up in hotel bedrooms. To go from the humour and seediness of that to the full-on intensity of Sibelius's *Var det en dröm?* (Was it a Dream?) was quite a feat.

Juntunen is an astonishing talent; watch out for her performance of Sibelius's *Luonnotar* with the

Philharmonia next year.

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