

The Boston Musical Intelligencer

a virtual journal and blog of the classical music scene in Boston

Robert Levin, advisor; Bettina A. Norton, emerita editor; Lee Eiseman, publisher

July 28, 2013

More Britten to Maverick—Then Escher

by Jay Wenk

on Aurea's Britten-Illuminations, July 27th, Maverick Concerts in Woodstock NY

Around the works of Benjamin Britten in his centenary year, Alexander Platt, music director of Maverick Concerts, created a beautiful extensive program. Last Saturday night in Maverick's unique Music Hall in the Woods outside Woodstock NY, the concert began with an exquisite harmonica improvisation on Britten's *Elegy for Solo Viola*, with the wonders of circular breathing for that instrument brilliantly demonstrated by Chris Turner. Poetry and statements from Auden, Britten, Spender, Virginia Woolf and Isherwood, all relevant to the central theme of the celebration, were presented by readers Malcolm Ingram and Turner, intermixed with music of Britten, Purcell and Frank Bridge, Britten's first teacher (at age 13). The Aurea Ensemble comprises Ingram and Turner with the string quartet of violinists Katherine Winterstein and Charles Sherba, violist Consuelo Sherba and cellist Emmanuel Feldman. They have the superb sound and precision expected of professionals but with the musicality that makes everything soar. Purcell's *Chacony in G Minor* (arr. Britten), variations in chaconne form, is a piece that should replace that overperformed Albinoni *Adagio*, whose excessively romantic dead march string arrangement is okay once or twice only. Purcell's variations are lyric, moving, tender and powerful, with the clarity that this early English composer (1659-1695) always brings. It is a new piece to me, and I will not let much time go by without hearing it again. Aurea also played a three-movement string quartet by Frank Bridge, made up of three *Idylls*, each performed separately with readings between. As Bridge and Britten were violists, their music offers considerable wonderful writing for the instrument, including solos within movements, and notably Britten's *Elegy for Solo Viola*.

After intermission came several more readings and another harmonica solo by Turner, showing that Larry Adler, the great classical-harmonica soloist of my youth, has been matched. The major piece was Britten's *Les Illuminations*, Op 18, for high tenor and string orchestra, composed in Woodstock in 1939. Britten's partner, Peter Pears, was the first to sing this demanding part, and Paul Appleby today was completely capable; several descending glissandos in these songs are no laughing matter to get right. Aurea was joined by the Maverick Chamber Players, conducted by Platt, with the viola, cellos, and basses particularly sensitive, not to malign the violins. Platt's cues are wonderfully precise, in the manner of choral conductors, his earliest training. I extend even greater credit to him for taste: assembling this program of music and recitation was an enormously successful effort, with the intensity of performance reflected by audience response. I felt fortunate to have been present at this world-class event.