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World-class singer and pianist turn evening into pure magic

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Renowned Italian soprano Cristina Mantese and Argentinian pianist Daniel Levy touched the audience's hearts with their rendering of romantic songs at the Ascona Music Festival 2012.

The recital programme featuring songs by the Romantic composers Robert Schumann, Clara Wieck Schumann and Johannes Brahms was the culmination of a lovely spring day and promised to be an enchanting evening.

As the lights in the church of Collegio Papio dimmed, the two musicians, modest and with a smile on their faces, made their entrance. Mantese wearing a long elegant dress that gave her look a romantic touch and Levy in suit and tie made you feel right away that they were a seasoned team - this became evident as soon as the concert started.

With a look of concentration on their faces, they collected themselves before launching off with *Widmung*, a song from the *Myrten* cycle that Robert Schumann had composed as a wedding present for his wife Clara.

The piano started out gently but passionately and was joined by the lyric soprano a few bars later. Mantese's clear voice beautifully conveyed the heartfelt emotions in the song and was perfectly complemented by Levy's sensitive accompaniment. Watching her sing was fascinating, as the emotions were expressed through music and reflected in her facial expressions.

Another three flower-like songs from the same cycle - *Du bist wie eine Blume*, *Die Lotosblume* and *Der Nussbaum* - followed. Mantese rendered the calm song *Du bist wie eine Blume* with a touching, warm and expressive voice, conveying the wistful longing with a rich vibrato and the fast passages with a light voice and effortless coloratura.

The soprano voice and piano were a match made in heaven - Mantese's radiant voice harmonised beautifully with Levy's sensitive piano playing.

Next were *Von ewiger Liebe* und *Die Mainacht* by Brahms, two meditations on love that allowed Mantese to use her dark timbre to express longing. Soft melancholic passages full of yearning alternated with powerful and passionate ones. The piano never dominated the soprano but complemented it beautifully and the two voices blended into a balanced whole.

The three songs *Warum willst du and're fragen*, *Liebst du um Schönheit*, and *Am Strande* by Clara Wieck Schumann came next. She had composed and given them to her husband as birthday presents, expressing her love, passion but also melancholy, grief and wistfulness. Mantese conveyed those feelings with lightness and subtlety, yet an expressiveness and intensity that was captivating. She used the tonal qualities of her voice, her facial expressions and movements of the hand to show the array of emotions in the songs. The ease and sensitivity with which she changed pitch and tone to convey playfulness, passion, melancholy and nostalgia was remarkable and left the audience spellbound.

Pianist and singer were completely immersed in the music. They rendered the songs with a lyrical sensitivity, passion, musical lightness and a touch of *bel canto* that created a magical atmosphere.

For the last part of the romantic journey, Levy and Mantese performed 12 songs from Robert Schumann's *Liederkreis* op 39. The first six songs had a happy quality that was reflected in the light, bright timbre of Mantese's full-voiced soprano. She brought out the romantic note of the songs by using art song style and turning towards Levy to engage the piano voice in dialogue.

It was an evening of pure musical delight. Listening to the duo evoke the feelings in a song with great subtlety in a matter of minutes was a pleasure. The audience was enchanted by the versatility of Mantese's voice and the ease, yet depth with which she interpreted the songs and the subtlety and sensitivity with which Levy accompanied her.

The audience thanked the artists for the moving and well-rounded performance with a long round of applause and the concert concluded with the encore *Guten Abend, gut Nacht* by Brahms, an appropriate ending of the evening.

Fact file:

Ascona Music Festival

The Liederabend by Italian soprano Cristina Mantese and Argentinian pianist Daniel Levy was part of the Ascona Music Festival that was held for the third time in April and May.

The festival offered a Liederabend and four piano recitals, featuring works by Scarlatti, Bach, Mozart, Schubert, Mendelssohn Chopin, Liszt, and Scriabin, to name but a few.

The Ascona Music Festival was established in 2009 at the initiative of pianist Daniel Levy and a small circle of friends who wished to offer the young, the old and families the opportunity to experience classical music in a charming setting.

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