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I've heard few operatic voices as beautiful as this Norwegian soprano Lise Davidsen managed to scale down her voice for Schubert without losing any warmth, roundness or intensity



'Davidsen is in so many ways a model of a great modern singer,' writes Nicholas Kenyon

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Lise Davidsen/James Baillieu, Aldeburgh Festival

★★★★★

There are few more sympathetic places in which to encounter great music than the concert hall that composer Benjamin Britten built (and then rebuilt after a dramatic fire) at Snape Maltings, which sits by the river Alde, looking out over the reeds and the water. And for the opening weekend of this year's Aldeburgh Festival, on a perfect June day, the hall welcomed the Norwegian soprano Lise Davidsen and pianist James Baillieu for an immaculate recital of Schubert songs, which refreshed the soul and lifted the spirits.

Davidsen, still only 39, has made her name in Wagner, with a big, laser-like voice that, when I heard her in the Ring at Bayreuth, filled that theatre with voluptuous sound. Could she scale it down for Schubert? She did, without it sounding in any way miniaturised, losing nothing of the ideally rounded phrases and varied colours that she brought to the bigger repertory. Her voice is still warm, full and intense, inclined to press forward in danger of losing pitch at the top of the range, but deeply moving in its essential simplicity.

Davidsen is in so many ways a model of a great modern singer. There is vibrato, but it is restrained and controlled; there's continuity of line, but legato does not overtake everything and consonants are heard, making the texts vivid. At Aldeburgh, the programme was cleverly selected and ideally grouped, winningly presented by her and Baillieu, and

the whole approach was unpretentious and welcoming. Her Schubert selection was dominated by the quest for love, but included some surprising religious numbers. Mignon's songs to Goethe's texts about her journey from Italy to Germany formed one group, with the chorale-like *Heiss mich nicht reden* nobly sustained; *Der Zwerg*, the Dwarf, with its obsessive imagery, exploited her low register while allowing her to bring a sharp edge to the sound.

James Baillieu matched her with a lovely fluency, and when Davidsen raced away at the start of the second half with *Der Musensohn*, he caught up faultlessly. The climax of the recital was quite overwhelming: after the tension built with the rising lines of *Du bist die Ruh*, scrupulously controlled, she allowed one moment of Wagnerian amplitude in the big song *Die Allmacht*. The melodramatic nun's story *Die junge Nonne* led to the tragedy of the *Erkönig's* revelation of death. And then she wound down the tension with the serene *Litany for the Feast of All Souls* – every note deeply considered, piercing the heart.

Benjamin Britten died 50 years ago this December, and Schubert was one of the central composers whom he often performed with his partner Peter Pears. This recital was an apt beginning for the festival they founded, and which still flourishes with renewed artistic life today. NK

*Aldeburgh Festival continues until June 28. Info: [brittenpearsarts.org](http://brittenpearsarts.org)*