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WREATH-LAYING IN THE GEORGE ELIOT MEMORIAL GARDEN, NUNEATON, 16 JUNE 1996

The Guest of Honour was Marjorie Bruce who gave the following Address:

Yesterday evening Pat Williams and I much enjoyed performing our recital based on George Eliot's words and on her concert-going and home musical entertainment experiences. Usually a recital programme of this kind is given once and never heard again (as is the case with most concerts). Performers in opera, and even more in musicals, will have the pleasure, which may eventually turn into the pain, of reproducing the same performance over and over again. Can they, like Browning's wise thrush, repeat their first fine careless rapture? The cry of encore at the end of a recital often elicits one other song only from the performer, although there was the time when an English tenor performing at La Scala, Milan, received so many encores that he could not continue. The audience insisted - 'You will sing it again and again and again, until you get it right!'

Pat and I have been most privileged with our recital. Not only have we had the opportunity to do it again, but the first time we performed in the superb surroundings of the National Portrait Gallery, only a short distance from portraits of George Eliot and many of her contemporaries, and the second time in George Eliot's very own drawing room, or as near as we could get to it bearing in mind that the original has long since ceased to exist. For Pat there was the experience of accompanying on a piano whose keys had been touched, with some skill, by George Eliot herself.

There is a drawback, however, in doing something only once, knowing that if it goes wrong there is no opportunity for correction. It certainly concentrates the mind! Writers do have the advantage over performers in this respect. If they don't like what they've written they can change it as much and as often as they like, up to the time of publication. Even after publication, if they run to a second edition, they can revise and correct to some extent. Our second edition may have been different, indeed inevitably, given the nature of musical performance, it will have been different, and I hope none the worse for that.

Music, while in performance less permanent than the written word, does, possibly for that very reason, have more power to affect the emotions of an audience. That is not to say that the written word does not have immense power to affect the emotion of the reader. My husband Jonathan has been known to fall out of bed with laughter when reading P.G. Wodehouse. The written word can equally move one to tears. But music does somehow seem to fill one's being with sadness, happiness or whatever the composer and performers between them manage, when music is performed to the highest standards, to communicate to sympathetic listeners. As Maggie said in *The Mill on the Floss*, 'I think I should have no other wants, if I could always have plenty of music. It seems to infuse strength into my limbs, and ideas into my brain. Life seems to go on without effort when I am filled with music'.

Singers have perhaps the best of both worlds; instrumental performers use the particular qualities of their instruments and the notes provided by the composers to put across a wholly abstract sensation. Singers on the other hand, have words! To listen to some singers of course you might not know that. It is what all singers must strive for and yet it is the most difficult thing in the world to do to sing beautifully and at the same time to enunciate the words so that the audience can hear and understand them. Hearing and understanding are not of course the same thing. For example our short song recital yesterday included some quite straightforward biblical English, a fairly obscure text set by Purcell assuming the audience to be intimately acquainted with classical mythology, words from *Messiah* known to every music lover in the English speaking world, dramatic Italian, some very fast German and last, but of course far from least, six poems from George Eliot's *Spanish Gypsy* which might need a number of hearings to be fully understood; and indeed are the words of poets ever fully understood, or even meant to be fully understood? But for me the *music* greatly added to my understanding of the *words* as I sought to communicate the depth of meaning in these poems.

In her last published work, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, George Eliot wrote 'It is a commonplace that words, writings, measures, and performances in general, have qualities assigned them not by direct judgement on the performances themselves, but by a presumption of what they are likely to be, considering who is the performer'. I don't know what preconceptions yesterday's audience brought with them but I do hope that they enjoyed a programme formed from George Eliot's own taste in music as much as we enjoyed performing it.