

**RUBY HUGHES, HUW WATKINS**  
**St Andrew's Church, Presteigne \*\*\*\***

It's fascinating to seek out links in the shrewd programming artistic director George Vass brings to the Presteigne Festival, certainly one element in the annual event's rewards which draw returning visitors year after year and which will intrigue new faces.

Saturday's recital from soprano Ruby Hughes and accompanist Huw Watkins was a case in point. Entitled 'A Charm of Lullabies' it did indeed have a largely underlying theme of babyhood and sleep, but there were so many twists in the tale here, with a disturbing pessimism belying the balm of a sunny afternoon outside.

The many moods of Britten's own Charm of Lullabies already exemplified what was to come: Hughes' intensely committed response to texts, tone opening out into glorious bloom, Watkins' generous ability to capture the essence underlying every texture of piano-writing.

And what wonderful texts these are, as are almost all of them – Christina Rossetti, Dickinson, Larkin, Yeats, depicting the poignancy of love remembered – in Watkin's own Echo song-cycle, receiving here its UK premiere. Watkins picks out a key word from each poem and crafts the accompaniment accordingly. Hughes deployed a huge range of colours, but diction sometimes clouded under pressure, and her habit of conducting every breath of phrases did prove distracting.

Echo ends with the sombre, unsettling and incomprehensible 'Baby Blue' by David Harsent, a presage of what was to follow in Helen Grime's Bright Travellers. This was a cycle with vocal lines intimately exulting in the fierce joy of pregnancy and delivery (Fiona Benson the poet) – though the in-depth analysis of breast-feeding was perhaps gratuitous – but ending with a grim depiction of stillbirth.

Hughes invested huge emotional involvement in this work, collecting herself to deliver a consoling account of Berg's Seven Early Songs, so shapely in their construction (no wonder Britten was influenced by him), and touchingly redolent of both Brahms and Wagner.

Christopher Morley