

‘Bent And Broken Into A Better Shape’- The magical storytelling of Mr. Charles Dickens

Steve Bingham & Jeremy Harmer

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Report by Scott Sherriff

Introduction

Jeremy Harmer, prominent figure on the global English Language Teaching stage, and Steve Bingham, from the world renowned Bingham String Quartet, previously joined forces for the show ‘Touchable Dreams’, performed throughout the UK and abroad to significant acclaim.

Following this successful collaboration, they accepted the British Council’s invitation to create an event commemorating the 200th anniversary of Charles Dickens’ birth, producing a show that fused ten excerpts from Dickens’ novels with original music.

‘It was the best of times, it was the worst of times’, from *A Tale of Two Cities*

Bingham’s lilting strings were accompanied by the rousing cadence of Harmer reciting perhaps the most famous opening of any novel. The sentiments are those of Sydney Carton, a man who through an extraordinary act of self-sacrifice finds redemption. This is a theme that imbues much of Dickens’ work and was a thread woven through Harmer and Bingham’s presentation.

‘Nothing but the facts’, from *Hard Times*

Dickens was, Harmer averred, the most extraordinary storyteller there has ever been. His intense attention to detail ensures that, once met, Dickens’ characters are never forgotten; a case in point being Mr Gradgrind.

An appropriate choice given the number of educators present in the hall, Harmer assumed the role of the formidable teacher, commanding us to "stick to the facts", supported by Bingham's violin and its similarly persuasive strains.

'London Fog', from *Bleak House*

Dickens was angry about the great inequalities he identified in 19th century Britain. As a young man he worked as a reporter in the Houses of Parliament and the law courts, developing a profound distrust of elements within the establishment.

In 'Bleak House', London's omnipotent fog becomes the metaphor for this rotten society, its moral malaise and, specifically, the Court of Chancery's transgressions. Bingham demonstrated his superb ability to 'live loop', adding layer upon layer of discordant notes to create an unnerving tone of insidious malevolence.

'The Courtyard', from *Great Expectations*

Harmer marveled further at Dickens' genius for characterisation, citing Philip Pirrip as a fine example. The audience were transported to the desolate graveyard where Pip first encounters Magwitch. As Harmer wonderfully oscillated from terrified young boy to threatening convict, Bingham provided flawless aural complement, perfectly conjuring the scene with crashing waves, howling wind and lashing rain.

'Betsey Trotwood and Mr Dick', from *David Copperfield*

Dickens was not just a master of high drama. He also possessed a deft comedic touch, notably in 'David Copperfield'.

Copperfield, the young child who is forced to work and then leaves home to become a writer, is arguably the most autobiographical of Dickens' characters.

Betsey takes great offence at anyone who dares encroach her property! Bingham's jaunty chords captured the moment David Copperfield arrives at Betsey's house and when he meets Mr Dick.

'The debtors' prison', from *Little Dorrit*

Dickens' happy childhood was interrupted at the age of ten when his father was sent to Marshalsea, the debtors' prison. Taken out of school, Dickens was sent to work long hours in a boot-blackening factory, something he would resent for the rest of his life.

Harmer recited the account of Arthur Clenman's stretch in Marshalsea Prison and the kindness shown to him by Amy. As Clenman lamented his fate, Bingham's melody was mournful and anguished, capturing the man's longing for freedom.

'The Murder of Nancy', from *Oliver Twist*

In the late 1850s, people would queue around the block to attend Dickens' public readings across Britain and America.

On one occasion, against strong warnings not to select the passage on the grounds it would be too horrifying for the gathered audience, Dickens recounted 'The Murder of Nancy'.

Harmer's impassioned reading followed by Bingham's chilling organ accompaniment confirmed the scene has lost none of its edge.

'Ruins of Satis House', from *Great Expectations*

It was here that Harmer and Bingham combined to produce the most beautifully moving moment of the evening in their rendering of Pip and Estella's reunion amidst the ghosts of Satis House.

Bingham's notes were initially spritely and inquisitive, plucking at the strings, looping the sounds and adding deep bass.

As Pip and Estella's encounter intensified, so too did the music, becoming sweepingly romantic in such a way as to suggest there might be a future for the couple.

This was an incredibly poignant piece of performance art.

'Fezziwig's Christmas Party', from *A Christmas Carol*

Dickens was a great socialite, his love of a good party reflected in a scene from 'A Christmas Carol'.

Returning to the theme of redemption, Harmer marked Ebenezer Scrooge's journey to salvation, a route that takes him back to when he was a young apprentice working for Mr Fezziwig, and the party he throws on Christmas Eve.

In witty fashion, the frivolities of this Christmas Past were brought to life, Bingham immersing himself in the role of the out-of-tune fiddler with great aplomb!

'Goodbye', from *Little Dorrit*

Harmer recollected Arthur and Amy's wedding day. Utilising the array of colorful hand bells that had been decoratively displayed throughout the show, Harmer and Bingham bade the audience farewell.

Final Thoughts

The vast number of Dickens adaptations over the years on radio, television and film must weigh heavily on the shoulders of any artists attempting to narrate the great author's stories. The challenge is to find a new angle.

However, the achievement of Harmer and Bingham's show was that they did indeed accomplish this most difficult feat, triumphantly breathing new life into works that are so familiar.

This was a very 21st century event. The show was being streamed to countries across the world via the Internet. Yet Harmer and Bingham's artistry was to make those present at BMA House feel as though they were a 19th century audience enthralled and captivated for the first time by Dickens' storytelling. We had the best of times.