



Watching the Olympics is watching a disaster waiting to happen Hugo Rifkind

# Cardiff Singer of the World

By Hilary Finch at St David's Hall, Cardiff  
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CALL it what you will — star quality, audience awareness, the wow factor — that, in the end, is what swings a jury. And when, at the weekend, they swung in favour of a 27-year-old American soprano called Nicole Cabell, there weren't too many dissenting voices.

Cabell walks away with £10,000, a BBC and a Welsh National Opera engagement — and a memo, at the very least, in the diaries of opera intendants worldwide.

Earlier in the week, there had been murmurings. Cabell is from the Chicago Lyric Opera Centre, an institution not unknown to an erstwhile director of WNO. And she had already won a Marilyn Horne Foundation Recital. Horne was on the jury. And then, I suspect, there was the sour grapes factor: though it's hardly Cabell's fault if she has the glamour quotient of Shirley Bassey and Nefertiti combined.

When Cabell opened that great smiling mouth, what we heard was liquid gold: the real thing. Her finals programme, accompanied by the BBC National Orchestra of Wales under Carlo Rizzi, showed her sense of warm humanity, projected confidently within a technique strong enough to take it, in *How can I cherish my man* from Tippett's *A Child of our Time*. Ilia's aria *Se il padre perdei* from *Idomeneo* revealed Cabell as a stylish Mozartian. And she was spellbinding in her final cadenza from *Entre l'amour et le devoir* from Berlioz's *Benvenuto Cellini*.

Cabell's ability to engage her audience put her performance on a different level from the nonetheless accomplished Italian soprano Daria Masiero; just as the Chilean tenor Luis Olivares Sandoval had more than the edge over the English tenor Andrew Kennedy when it came to the finals. Where Kennedy's tenor seemed locked into his body, Sandoval's reached out and touched his listeners, as he graphically set his scenes from Donizetti, Gounod and Verdi.

Kennedy's strengths lie in his immaculate sense of style and his keen musical and verbal intelligence. They rightly won him the Rosenblatt Recital Song Prize (£5,000, a London recital, and continued membership of Radio 3's New Generation Artists scheme.) This year, the RRSP had its own grand finale: a major and significant advance within this competition, and one which not only showcases the rich repertoire of song but also some fine piano playing: Llyr Williams 's accompanying of Grainger's song *Shallow Brown* will stay in the memory as long as any of the starry vocal performances.

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The New Zealand mezzo Wendy Dawn Thompson had, like Kennedy, been placed highly in both the Song Prize and the Opera finale. Her sheer generosity — she strides on as though determined that she and everyone else shall relish every second — compensates for sometimes still over-generalised expression. But she's a trouper, and she'll troupe far.

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