

PRESTEIGNE FESTIVAL

St Andrew's Church, Presteigne ****

As Michael Berkeley, President of the Presteigne Festival, neatly put it, people come to Presteigne each year knowing they're going to hear music by modern composers they know and like, plus a few they perhaps don't like as much.

This was at Friday's Celebration Concert for George Vass, which marked Vass' sixtieth birthday and his twenty-five year tenure as festival artistic director by showcasing music firmly in the 'know and like' category. Most notably it included the world premiere of a collaborative undertaking by eight composers Vass has worked with (and given work to) over many years.

Variations on 'Lovely Joan' for string orchestra – here Vass' excellent Festival Orchestra (where does he find such capable players?) – has an attractive unity of style that makes it hold together extremely well. With several touches of wry humour (Vass clearly enjoyed Berkeley's 'Frolic' and Matthew Taylor's jolly finale) and subtle romanticism (Adrian Williams' Adagio molto offered the most gently serious variation of the whole set) it fulfilled its brief admirably.

More memorable, though, was composer-in-residence Edward Gregson's 'Goddess', with warm sonorities and elegiac yearning from the viola soloist Rachel Roberts, sensual lyricism throughout, and a beautifully conceived ending where the music evaporated in shadowy threads of melody, harmonics and tremolo shivers.

If only James Francis Brown's Trio Concertante had been so effectively structured. As a sort of English-pastoral homage it seemed to consist of little more than figuration and tuneful fragments that implied something more significant was on its way, but never materialised. Still, the audience appeared to enjoy it.

The main work of the previous evening, Judith Weir's *The Consolations of Scholarship* (with a text derived from two Chinese Yüan dramas) had provided much more challenging listening. For the remarkably accomplished Berkeley Ensemble and mezzo-soprano Rebecca Afonwy-Jones it was a tour de force, brilliantly executed by the nine instrumentalists under Vass's undemonstratively precise direction, and sung/spoken/declaimed (it contains a lot of Sprechstimme) by Afonwy-Jones with remarkable clarity and vocal richness.

In just twenty-five minutes this compact dramatic monologue was totally effective and its quirky tonal language often quite charming. The audience's polite response, though, suggested that such qualities were not fully appreciated.

Even more stimulating was Tarik O'Regan's *A Letter of Rights* (words drawn from Magna Carta) on Sunday night, featuring the amazingly virtuosic Sine Nomine International Touring Choir and Vass's festival strings, including the gentlest of tinkling percussion, in stunning form.

O'Regan's subtly inventive scoring and multi-layered word-setting, with edgy close-harmony textures and soprano solo sections of stratospheric brilliance, was wonderfully engaging. And when it concluded with a tolling bell against quietly sustained strings the effect was really quite poignant.

David Hart