

**TIM HORTON**

**St Andrew's Church, Presteigne \*\*\*\*\***

**SINE NOMINE INTERNATIONAL TOURING CHOIR**

**St Mary's Church, Pembridge \*\*\*\*\***

One of the threads which has developed during the Presteigne Festival's 35-year history has been the allocation of solo performance slots to young artists from chamber-group residencies.

One such is Tim Horton, pianist with the Leonore Trio, who delivered his own recital on Friday afternoon. On a well set-up Fazioli instrument he began with an extraordinarily supple, natural account of the Berg Sonata, breathing harmonic warmth into the structure of this introverted work.

Six Little Piano Pieces by composer-in-residence Edward Gregson continued this Second Viennese sound world, well-attuned to their individual characters and often tricky technical demands.

No fewer than six Festival commissions were then premiered, each taking Beethoven's late Bagatelles Op 126 as a starting-point. Martin Butler's Late immediately evoked late Beethoven; Jack Sheen's Bagatelle (for Trisha Brown) is a cunningly constructed miniature awash with pedal resonances; Gabriel Jackson's Andante cantabile e grazioso is quietly visionary, sometimes in the spirit of Grieg; Michael Zev Gordon's Bagatelle after Beethoven has a scalic subtext of inverted church-bell changes; Cheryl Frances-Hoad's Blurry Bagatelle is a patient exercise in pedal-sustained sonorities; and David Knotts' Wienerwald, Wildewald, flirts with homages to other composers and never quite gets round to quoting Beethoven.

Finally we heard the six Bagatelles of Beethoven's Op 126 themselves, Horton responsive to all their mercurial and beatific qualities, and producing an unforgettable, simple little G major which still haunts my memory.

Another Presteigne hallmark is its policy of championing returning composers. One such is Cecilia McDowall, whose Love incorruptible was premiered by the remarkable Sine Nomine International Touring Choir under the equally remarkable Susan Hollingworth in Pembridge's beautiful, acoustically brilliant St Mary's Church on Monday.

The choir brought all its gifts of pizzicato-clear diction, a unanimity secured by exemplary attention to the conductor, confident sonority and well-shaped attack to this deeply-felt piece. Cascading textures suspending trenchant harmonies and angular melodic lines inform McDowall's sincere response to the soul-warming text before the music floats away into the ether on the word 'Awake!'

John Joubert, also a Presteigne regular, was represented by his Three Carols and There is no Rose, timeless, simple and directly communicative. At the other end of the sonic scale were Brahms' Fest- und Gedenkspruche, and Nielsen's Three Motets – and in a category of its own was the gloriously earthy Benedictio by the Estonian Urmas Sisask.

Christopher Morley