

Presteigne Festival Orchestra/George Vass

Tim Horton

Plenty of new works marked a milestone at a peaceful location that acts as an unexpected crucible for contemporary music

There's an old-world charm to Presteigne, the picturesque town nestling in the Welsh Marches. Although the owners of the book and bric-a-brac shops were nowhere to be seen as I wandered along the tiny high street, their shop doors were open and their wares on honesty-box sale. Perhaps they had just popped down the road to St Andrew's Church for a taste of the new.

This peaceful location is an unexpected crucible for contemporary music. The Presteigne Festival turns 35 this year, having totted up more than 150 commissions, and double celebrations were in order as George Vass, the festival's enterprising artistic director, marked the big 6-0. No cake or candles, but instead a concert, and the launch of a new fund to support new works – to which an impressive £10,000 has already been donated.

Vass' birthday gift was, of course, music hot off the press. Nothing to scare the sheep, though. Tonality and melody are thriving in Presteigne. *Variations on Lovely Joan* is a gorgeous addition to the string orchestra repertoire, remarkably coherent given that it's written by eight composers. Based on an English folk song, the variations are full of character, from Michael Berkeley's frolics to Sally Beamish's rapt stillness.

Yet there was another stand-out moment. Not James Francis Brown's Trio Concertante, Paul Patterson's Sinfonia or Frank Bridge's Suite – although how good to hear them all – but the ecstatic *Goddess* (2009), by the composer-in-residence Edward Gregson. It was fabulously played by the solo violist Rachel Roberts, the Presteigne Festival Orchestra and Vass.

Earlier on, the pianist Tim Horton had given not one, but six premieres. *Bagatelles after Beethoven* is a fascinating complement to the Op 126 set, opening with Martin Butler's potent distillation of Beethoven's late style and ending with David Knotts' evocative rumbles and grumbles. Yet the original Beethoven still sounded the most modern.

Rebecca Franks