

PRESTEIGNE FESTIVAL

St Andrew's Church, Presteigne ****

George Vass, long-standing artistic director and conductor of the Presteigne festival, has developed a dependably winning approach to programme planning. Take a main theme (Baltic music this year), add a composer-in-residence (Martin Butler), mark significant birthdays of others (here, David Matthews' 75th and Michael Berkeley's 70th), then compare and contrast.

These factors were all present in the opening and closing orchestral concerts. Friday's started with Arvo Pärt's *Cantus* in memory of Benjamin Britten (waves of anguished mourning, if a bit thinly expressed by the violins): Tuesday's began with Britten's own *Sinfonietta* Op 1 (youthful posturing and pretension in abundance, which in places Vass made sound quite joyous).

Huw Watkins also explored loss and mourning in *Remember* which, although a song cycle, sounded more like a voice-led tone poem than word settings. Soprano Ruby Hughes delivered the set with such expressive intensity and vocal colour that the words – or at least their consonants – seemed hardly to matter.

Three Housman Songs by David Matthews offered something a little less harrowing (although his take on 'Loveliest of trees' is actually quite dramatic) and more romantic, which Hughes conveyed with some sensual awareness, although even here textual clarity was often sacrificed for tone production.

Friday's programme also included Pärt's *Fratres*, where gentle arpeggios of a solo violin at the start herald decorative touches to an orientally inspired substructure. It's an intelligently structured piece which violinist Kristīne Balanas and Vass's responsive Festival Orchestra made sound engagingly hypnotic as it progressed.

On Tuesday they wove a similar effect on Haydn's *Violin Concerto in C* in a reading full of grace and refinement (and totally transformed orchestral strings), that Vass nudged along with benign, minimal direction. Elegance was also present, though of a different sort, in Matthews' *Symphony No 4* (like Prokofiev's 'Classical', written for a Haydnesque orchestra), especially in its blissful slow-movement serenade.

The other two works on Tuesday could not have been more different. Michael Berkeley's *Coronach* (written for Presteigne in 1988) has a power that fully engages the emotions, which here reached its pinnacle in leader Anna Smith's intensely poignant solo.

In total contrast the world premiere of Martin Butler's *Concertante Dances*, with the composer as solo pianist, was instantly attractive and in its sweetly old-fashioned use of repeated motifs, racy rhythms and mild syncopations demonstrated that contemporary music need not be 'difficult'. And that, for Presteigne, was quite a novelty.

David Hart