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PRESTEIGNE FESTIVAL 2018

There was a Baltic flavour to the thirty-sixth Presteigne Festival, which explored a range of music from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Other key programming strands included significant birthday celebrations for Michael Berkeley (70) and David Matthews (75) and a major retrospective of the output of composer-in-residence Martin Butler. Festival commissions were spread throughout the six days (23-28 August) of a yearly celebration of the arts that, through the guidance, vision and energy of artistic director George Vass, has become a highlight of the British cultural calendar.

An evening concert at St Andrew's Church, Presteigne, given by the Choir of Royal Holloway and the Festival Orchestra conducted by George Vass, marked the independence centenary of all three Baltic countries. Lithuanian composer Raminta Šerkšnytė's *De profundis* (1998) was a 12-minute piece for string orchestra based entirely on the interval of a minor third. Incorporating extended techniques such as glissandos and Bartók pizzicatos, the score juxtaposed edgy forward momentum with episodes of halting uncertainty and inward-looking stasis. The young players built a cogent musical entity from these disparate elements and brought a satisfying sense of stillness and repose to the closing bars with their long-breathed harmonics. With its intense spirituality, *Dona nobis pacem* for chorus and strings (1996) by Latvian composer Pēteris Vasks created a complete change of atmosphere. Emotionally committed throughout, the performers caught the work's profound synthesis of quiet meditation and passionate supplication. After this, the rich sonorities and nocturnal serenity of Estonian composer Ester Mägi's 1998 arrangement for string orchestra of her *Vesper* for violin and piano cast a potent spell over the capacity audience. In the wake of the score's central climax, a cadenza-like passage allowed the orchestra's superb leader Anna Smith to weave intricate and beautifully played solo lines over the vibrant string textures. To conclude the first half of the concert, the Concerto for two oboes and string orchestra in one movement (1982) by Latvian composer Pēteris Plakidis offered florid and sinuous interweaving oboe phrases set against more sustained harmonies in the strings. In the middle section, a piercing, stabbing figure injected fresh vitality into a score that attempted an uneasy reconciliation between traditional, folk-inspired material and more dissonant, modernist gestures. James Turnbull and Ben Marshall negotiated the winding, closely imitative solo writing with style and assurance, while George Vass kept the performance on a tight rein that allowed for moments of both spontaneity and contemplation.

After the interval we heard Michael Berkeley's *Touch Light* (2005) in his arrangement for violin, flute and strings. This work takes its inspiration from ecstatic love duets in the operas of Monteverdi and Handel and employs a ground bass to contain these passionate outpourings. The exquisite tension between the repeated pattern and the increasingly free-flowing solos above it helped to create a well-rounded and directly communicative piece. In relaxed vein, violinist Florence Cooke and flautist Kathryn Thomas seemed to enjoy thoroughly the rhapsodic freedom of their solo lines and in George Vass' sensitive direction, a potentially restrictive recurring formal device became reassuring and, ultimately, inspiring. Rounding off the concert, the Estonian composer Tõnu Kõrvits' *Kreek's Notebook* (2007)

offered a contemporary approach to folk hymns. This substantial, 30-minute piece for choir and strings embraced light, airy textures and resonant tutti in an affecting work of considerable dramatic flair and lyrical sensibility. The performers were alert to the material's protean tendencies and forged a convincing unity from its diverse ingredients. This highly ambitious programme was superbly performed. It did full justice to the festival's main theme as well as providing a showcase for the string players of the Festival Orchestra, whose fearless and meticulous first violins were a constant source of joy and wonder.

Cellist Joana Gutowska's late-morning solo recital at St Mary's Church, Kinnerton centred on the world premiere of Greek-British composer Manos Charalabopoulos' *Two Poems* (2017), a joint commission between the Presteigne Festival and the Royal Philharmonic Society. The first poem was declamatory in style, with extravagant gestures and ear-catching effects suggesting extrovert oratory. By contrast, the second poem was fragmentary and more reflective and wistful in tone. By carefully shaping and shading her playing, Gutowska ensured that the piece was far more than the sum of its intriguing and heterogeneous parts. Also on the programme was David Matthews' *Ein Celloleben*, a delightful celebration of the cello that included a whistle-stop tour of some of its repertoire. Many different humours were featured and Gutowska's vivacious performance conveyed fully the score's mercurial and festive disposition. Michael Berkeley's *Ode – In Memoriam*, on the other hand, chose to restrict itself to a profound exploration of emotions associated with grief, from numbed loss to bitter rage and a kind of troubled acceptance. Deeply moving, this piece tapped into the almost human, songlike quality of the instrument and provided the soloist with a powerfully eloquent vehicle for her interpretative and technical powers. Framed by a rhythmically vital performance of Catalan cellist and composer Gaspar Cassado's 1926 Suite for solo cello and a splendidly intuitive and fluent reading of Bach's Suite in C, BWV1009, this recital was a reminder of how diverse and diverting a programme consisting of works for one instrument can be in the hands of a natural story-teller.

Back at St Andrew's, Presteigne, an early evening concert given by the Presteigne Festival Ensemble also showcased Martin Butler as pianist and composer. A characterful and buoyant traversal of Mozart's Quintet in E flat for piano and wind instruments, K452 was followed by Huw Watkins' *Four Inventions*, for solo piano, inspired by Rhett Griffiths' poem *The Sibling Solution*. Actress Sally Ripley recited Griffiths' text before we heard Watkins' sensitive musical response, played with poetry and attention to detail by Joseph Tong. Martin Butler was at the keyboard for a performance of his own *Préludes Inégales*, for solo piano, named after an improvising group of which he is a member. There was an unselfconscious, rhetorical freedom about the three jazzy movements that called to mind the fluency and charm of Richard Rodney Bennett's music. Precision and fastidiousness were also present as a counterpoise to the score's frequent flights of fancy.

At the heart of this recital was the world premiere of another festival commission, *Dolly shot* for piano and wind instruments (oboe, clarinet, horn and bassoon) by Welsh composer Gareth Moorcroft. This engaging quintet used cinema techniques such as jump cuts between music played at different speeds. At mid-point, the music slowed down and zoomed in on the substance of the score in detail, reflecting the tracking shot of the title, before picking up speed again. A lot of striking material was packed into seven minutes, including some imaginative, spectral writing for piano in the score's central panel. I would like to hear this work again and, judging from their enthusiastic reaction, so would the rest of the audience. Martin Butler's *Fall* for flute and piano is related to his more substantial *Rondes d'Automne* for ensemble. The title of his duo reflects the descending flute line and the work's essential autumnal character. Kathryn Thomas was the expressive flautist, elegantly accompanied by the composer in this gently melancholic miniature. It was succeeded by Emma-Ruth Richards' passionate and deeply expressive *de Stamparare* for solo oboe. With a title translated into

English as 'soul cry', this four-minute soliloquy based on a Romanian folk-song included several pitch-bending effects. It was grippingly played by James Turnbull, who brought out the score's considerable dynamic and emotional range.

To conclude the concert, there was a rip-snorting reading of what is perhaps Butler's most famous work, *Dirty Beasts*. This takes the form of deftly scored accompaniments for flute (doubling piccolo), oboe, clarinet, horn, bassoon and piano to three characteristically visceral poems by Roald Dahl, narrated by a speaking actor. In this performance, Sally Ripley was an ebullient and versatile spoken guide, the composer joined the Presteigne players at the keyboard and George Vass directed proceedings. Prompted no doubt by the eponymous animal's initial exclamation of 'By Gum', Ripley sported a Yorkshire accent in 'The Pig', while in 'The Tummy Beast' she adopted clipped home-counties for the ghastly mother and ripe cockney for the stomach-dwelling 'thing'. In the alarming concluding verse setting of 'The Crocodile', the rhythmicised lines have to be synchronised with the music and this fleeting tour de force was brought off with aplomb. Witty and disconcerting in equal measure, Butler's musical treatments take their cue from Dahl's gruesome verse and they made an enduring impression in this dramatic, unflinching account.

A late-night choral concert, also at St Andrew's, saw a return of the Choir of Royal Holloway, this time conducted by their artistic director, Rupert Gough. In a diverse sequence of works celebrating the Annunciation that included music from Hildegard von Bingen to Arvo Pärt, a couple of scores stood out. Cecilia McDowall's hymn *Regina caeli* had strength of purpose and dramatic shifts in mood as well as beauty of line and it made a strong impression on the audience. Gabriel Jackson's motet *Ave Regina caelorum* featured an electric guitar, played by the accomplished and instinctive Ant Law, to accompany and comment on the choral contributions. This unusual combination created some fresh and unexpected perspectives on the material and the composer's bold attempt to bring together two routinely segregated sound-worlds was an act of inclusivity that reached beyond the realm of music. Another festival commission, David Bednal's *Regina caeli* received its first concert performance. This spirited setting was radiant and full of vitality; its flamboyant, melismatic lines were delivered with ecstatic verve by the young singers. The concert concluded with an inspiring rendition of James MacMillan's *Tota pulchra es*, a truly joyous work lit by the composer's fervent belief in the text.

George Vass' happy knack of compiling satisfying programmes from varied repertoire was especially apparent in the Festival Finale featuring the Presteigne Festival Orchestra. Britten's Sinfonietta in its chamber orchestral guise made a substantial and searching curtain-raiser and it received a scrupulous and exuberant performance. It was followed by a deeply eloquent reading of Michael Berkeley's 1988 *Coronach* for strings, which considers various aspects of grief with dignity and passion. At the centre of the evening's music-making was the world premiere of Martin Butler's exhilarating *Concertante Dances* for piano and chamber orchestra. This sparkling, fleet-footed Presteigne commission included nods to all the other works by the composer featured in the festival and made an enchanting impression. Butler the composer kept Butler the pianist on his mettle and the textures were wonderfully uncluttered and bright. After the interval, Kristine Balanas was the soloist in Haydn's Violin Concerto in C, Hob VIIa: 1. Her sovereign playing allied to an acute sensitivity to the character of the music makes her arguably one of the most outstanding talents to appear before a Presteigne audience and in the Haydn concerto her formidable musicianship was entirely at the service of the score. Just when we thought the concert had peaked early, the Festival Orchestra delivered a blisteringly fine account of David Matthews' Fourth Symphony of 1990. The opening movement's spare textures drew the listeners in and its belated flowering of harmony in the closing bars was particularly affecting. The young players tore into the driving scherzo second movement and had sophisticated fun with the swivel-eyed suavity of the fourth movement's

fast tango, with its notable marking of 'slightly manic'. Real depth of feeling was conveyed in the central slow third movement, which opens and closes with richly divided strings and introduces a meltingly expressive horn solo near the end. The lively, Haydnesque drollery of the sonata allegro finale left the audience delighted and ended the official programme on an uplifting note. A heart-warming encore in the form of Adrian Williams' song-like *Pastorale* for strings from his music for BBC TV's *China's Terracota Army* (2007) made a touching farewell.

In sum, the 2018 Presteigne Festival was a vintage example of an annual musical event that never fails to impress and excite. With new works in prospect from Cheryl Frances-Hoad, James Francis Brown, Freya Waley-Cohen and Adrian Williams, next year's festival is already shaping up to be another unmissable occasion.

Paul Conway