

Presteigne Festival Orchestra St Andrew's Church, Presteigne, Powys

★★★★☆

Past and present composers offer different answers to the same essential musical questions

Far from the madding crowds, in the verdant Welsh borders, is one of the UK's hotbeds of contemporary classical music. If newcomers strolling along Presteigne's narrow streets are welcomed with wary curiosity, the new works heard at the town's annual festival are rewarded with a loyal, enthusiastic audience — no more so than at the finale, which sprawled into a speech and encore.

Mind you, there was nothing scarily experimental on the programme overseen by George Vass, the conductor and artistic director, even though it included works by three living composers. Tradition and, dare I say it, being unfashionable, clearly pays off. Part of the secret must be in how Vass interweaves pieces from past and present. From Haydn's Violin Concerto in C major (with the poised soloist Kristine Balanas), composed in the 1760s, to Martin Butler's Concertante Dances, written this year, these composers offer different answers to the same essential musical questions.

Butler was this year's composer-in-residence, and nimbly performed the piano solo in his lively Presteigne commission. The three dance movements zipped by, with the catchy finale as carefree as a summer saunter at the seaside. This was quite a contrast to Michael Berkeley's arresting string-orchestra *Coronach*, in which a guttural eruption of grief meets the pure lament of tears. A piece named after a Gaelic funeral dirge felt a strange way to mark the British composer's 70th birthday, but he seemed happy enough.

The festival's other 'birthday boy' was David Matthews. For his 75th, we heard his vivid Fourth Symphony of 1990, inspired by Haydn, Machaut and the tango. Fitting, too, that the concert opened with the early *Sinfonietta* by Britten, whose influence all three composers acknowledged. Throughout the evening, there were plenty of notes to tax the Presteigne Festival Orchestra, and if we heard some ragged edges in their playing, we also heard plenty of polished gleam.

Rebecca Franks