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PRESTEIGNE FESTIVAL 2019

An American theme was threaded through the thirty-seventh Presteigne Festival, which included pieces by key creative artists born in the States as well as music by some illustrious émigrés. One of the two composers-in-residence, Hannah Lash, was also American. Unfortunately, due to serious illness, she was unable to attend the festival to hear her many featured works, but, happily, Cheryl Frances-Hoad, who shared the joint residency, was able to be present and participated in several of the always illuminating pre-concert talks. No fewer than nine festival commissions were programmed during the six days (22-27 August), alongside other premieres and performances of rare and neglected scores. Mainstream repertoire was also included, with time-honoured scores frequently shedding new light on the latest compositions and vice versa.

In the evening concert of Friday 23 August the strings of the Festival Orchestra under artistic director George Vass presented a typically well-balanced programme in the ideal acoustics of St Andrew's Church, Presteigne. They began with the UK premiere of Adrian Williams's Concerto for string orchestra in one movement, a joint commission from the festival and the Amsterdam Sinfonietta. This bold and life-affirming composition returned at regular intervals to the forthright and sinewy main ideas presented in its opening section, interleaving these recurrences with intricate solos and duos for the section leaders. Elements of scherzo and slow movement were deftly incorporated into the fluent development of the main material and the final passage reconsidered the principal ideas afresh as well as providing a satisfying summation of the score's chief characteristics. A valuable addition to the string repertoire, Williams's Concerto gave several players key opportunities to shine as soloists and as contributors to diverse small groups as well as being part of an orchestra. The single-movement structure kept the narrative flowing and the musical motifs were sufficiently robust to lodge in the memory and pliable enough to give rise to constant development and reconfiguration. Vass shaped the piece with care, allowing the many individual episodes to make their mark without losing sight of the overarching argument. The Festival Orchestra players brought vivacity and enthusiasm, as well as polish and refinement to the score, which was well received by the capacity audience. Ending the first half of the concert, a spirited and gripping account of Britten's masterly *Les Illuminations* featured the dramatic and responsive soprano Elizabeth Cragg. After the interval, Copland's Clarinet Concerto showcased soloist Rozenn Le Trionnaire, who offered poise and eloquence in the opening movement and precision and elegance in the second. Finally, there was a rare opportunity to hear the great Welsh composer William Mathias's *Divertimento*. This vigorous and lithe early work was laced with delightful syncopations and built to climaxes of open-stringed ardour. It was given a reading of suitably youthful energy in the incisive outer movements and affectingly wistful introspection in the songlike central Lento.

A recital by flautist Katherine Bryan and pianist Tom Poster at St Andrew's the following afternoon offered delicacy and poetry as well as wit and panache. Aaron Copland's *Duo* is a late work in which, having embraced serialism in the 1960s, the composer reconnected with his populist works of the 1930s and 1940s. Both performers responded to the emotional directness of the piece, savouring its melodic invention and capturing the slightly melancholic

resignation of the central slow movement. Inspired by Lorca's poetry, Cecilia McDowall's *The Moon Dances* (2003) celebrates various elements of dance. The opening movement, 'Paper sea and silver coins' evokes a carnival atmosphere with its flamboyant embellishments and driving, Cuban-style rhythms. 'Black with shadow and wolves' is a spectral sarabande and includes passages where the flautist plays directly into the piano to haunting effect. 'The red star trembles' explores the upper registers of both instruments and incorporates a central episode where the flute conveys the rise and fall of a swing etched across the night sky. In her sensitive responses to Lorca's text, McDowall explores the expressive range of the flute and sets it within the context of a variety of effective piano textures. Katherine Bryan and Tom Poster caught the hypnotic, otherworldly quality of McDowall's score as well as relishing its rhythmic verve. Taut and focussed, the *Sonata Serenata* by John Hawkins exploited different aspects of the flute's character. The opening movement was song-like and confessional and contrasted an introspective, chromatic idea heard at the outset with more radiant and flowing lines. Opening with an eloquent, free-flowing flute solo, the slow central movement was passionate and insistent, while the waltz-like, jazz-inflected finale began in a mood of nostalgic warmth but soon developed considerable nervous energy and ended with a trenchant, climactic coda. This compact score conveyed worlds of meaning in a single gesture and both players seemed keenly aware of its concentrated expressive power. This attractive programme ended with a crisp, articulate account of Prokofiev's Flute Sonata in D, Op 94, alert to the score's brittle humour and tender lyricism.

Later the same afternoon in the Church of St Mary Magdalene, Bleddfa, violinist Mathilde Milwidsky, violist Sarah-Jane Bradley and cellist Alice Neary presented four contrasting works for string trio. A polished account of Schubert's Trio in B flat, D471 and a lively realisation of Ernő Dohnányi's delightful Serenade in C, Op 10 framed deeply considered renderings of two searching pieces from this century. Cheryl Frances-Hoad's *The Ogre Lover* (2007) is a phantasmagorical, single-movement piece of epigrammatic (and often expressionistic) intensity divided into seven short connected movements, each of which is based on a line or two from the poem 'Fairytale' by Ted Hughes. The composer followed her imagination in each of these tiny, interconnected vignettes yet there was a formal strength in evidence binding the various portions of the piece together and the players found a perfect balance between driving the narrative forward and savouring the various sections as pure, self-contained music. Alice Neary had fun portraying the gruff, galumphing eponymous giant in the second section and in the gnomic coda the unsettling, glacial harmonics and ominous, subterranean trembling were properly disturbing. Receiving its first performance, James Francis Brown's String Trio No 2 was a superbly crafted single-movement work that juxtaposed fast and slow passages and in which the viola often held sway at critical junctures. The richly melodic writing was an especial pleasure and the interplay between the instruments was engrossing and deeply satisfying. Sarah-Jane Bradley, a regular visitor to the festival both as soloist and chamber musician, was predictably fine in the expressive passages for solo viola between movements, but all three players made their mark, rewarding the composer with a deeply felt and warmly engaging premiere of this major festival commission.

Back at St Andrew's Presteigne, the evening concert of 24 August was given by the Albion Quartet. Relaxed and spontaneous-sounding in Dvořák's 'American' String Quartet in F, Op 96, these young musicians found excitement and virtuosity in William Walton's String Quartet No 2 in A minor after the interval. At the heart of their recital, the Albion players were joined by Rozenn Le Trionnaire for the first performance of a festival commission, *Tales of the Invisible* for clarinet and string quartet by Cheryl Frances-Hoad. The piece was inspired by ideas of boundaries and borders between different states of mind as well as geographical lines but, such was the level of invention of the three movements that they stood perfectly well on their own, devoid of any extra-musical associations. Of particular note was the imaginative way in which the composer deployed the clarinet among the other players. Often treated as an outsider, the 'otherness' of the clarinet as a wind instrument set against four strings was

emphasised to dramatic effect. In the opening bars of the first movement, for example, the clarinet's gentle phrases were contrasted with the strings' waspish outbursts. In the ensuing passage, the clarinet dived down into its chalumeau register and paired up with the cello before the cello seems to realise what was happening and leaped into harmonics high above the clarinet line. Soon the clarinet was aping the furious eruptions first heard in the strings in the opening bars and the movement continued with both protagonists seemingly irreconcilable. In the central Largo, the clarinet took the role of an outsider trying to break through the wall of solidarity represented by the four string players. Here the clarinet's eloquently sustained themes gained in intensity as the movement progressed and Rozenn Le Trionnaire inspired admiration with her impassioned performance. In the more light-hearted finale, a certain rapprochement was reached as all five musicians joined in a lively and engaging musical discussion before a delightfully nonchalant payoff. All five players brought great subtlety and nuance to a deft and enigmatic score which I hope will be heard again soon so that its elusive but rewarding qualities can be fully appreciated.

A Portrait Concert for Hannah Lash took place at St Michael's Church, Discoed in the early afternoon of 25 August in which two of the composer's works were programmed. *Three Shades without Angles*, for flute, viola and harp was a tightly constructed piece based on a single idea heard at the outset which is transformed as the music unfolds. By turns deeply expressive and ecstatic, the music eventually faded to a gentle, hushed conclusion, all passion spent. Flautist Katherine Bryan, violist Sarah-Jane Bradley and harpist Oliver Wass responded to the score's technical and interpretative challenges with ingenuity and impressive musicianship. Percussionist George Barton joined Bryan and Wass for the UK premiere of *Folksongs*, for flute, percussion and harp, which was full of colour and energy. The Celtic-sounding first movement had a gently hypnotic rhythmic drive and its haunting melody subtly was deconstructed as the music unfurled; the second, which draws its inspiration from homophonic choral singing, was halting and lustrous with piccolo shadowed by chimes; the third took the form of a solitary-sounding piccolo soliloquy gently punctuated by gong and harp, and the fourth featured tongue-drums, made effective use of asymmetrical rhythms and exploited the harp's metallic twang as well as its mellifluous flow. A diverting and delectable tribute to the simplicity and staying power of folk music, this often delicately scored piece found Hannah Lash at her most natural and immediately expressive. *Darkness Draws In*, Op 102, for solo viola by David Matthews took the form of a set of variations on a Manx song often sung on the island at close of day. The five variations unfold with a restatement of the opening variation before the appearance of the theme, which is repeated twice. Matthews's profoundly intimate work was beautifully realised by its dedicatee, Sarah-Jane Bradley. Two works by Debussy rounded out this appealing and evocative event: a commanding performance of *Syrinx* given from the pulpit by Katherine Bryan and an involving account of the Sonata for flute, viola and harp. Harpist Oliver Wass must be singled out for particular praise for stepping in for Hannah Lash at very short notice and giving such cogent and polished readings of three demanding works.

Later that afternoon, at the Church of St Mary Magdalene, Bleddfa the Albion Quartet gave the first performance of another festival commission, Freya Waley-Cohen's *Winterbourne*, which was inspired by a stream that flows only in winter. This vivid piece explored a range of sonorities as the main material is passed from instrument to instrument, finally finding a firm root in the lower reaches of the cello. In the magical closing bars, the music takes flight into the stratosphere with delicate echoes of the opening statement left behind. The Albion Quartet sounded fully committed to this sensitive and adventurous score and gave it an assured and poetic concert debut. Also on their programme was a commanding and extremely well played performance of Matthew Taylor's String Quartet No 5 (2008) that crackled with energy in the stormy opening Allegro con brio, reached an expressive climax at the start of the central fugue and yet also inhabited fully the gentle stillness of the concluding lullaby. A supremely relaxed and almost improvisatory approach to Schubert's 'Rosamunde' Quartet in A

minor D804 ensured that the familiar themes emerged newly minted. This was an exceptional recital from an ensemble that combines supreme technical excellence with genuine interpretative flair.

In the evening concert of 25 August, George Vass conducted the Festival Orchestra at St Andrew's Church, Presteigne in an immensely colourful programme that brought together several of this year's thematic strands as well as showcasing works by both composers-in-residence. Arthur Honegger's entrancing *Pastorale d'été* was very sensitively played and it was followed by an ideally paced account of Samuel Barber's *Adagio*, which unfolded with natural grace and nobility. After this emotionally powerful experience, Cheryl Frances-Hoad's droll and extrovert *Katharsis* for cello and ensemble made a perfect counterbalance. Inspired variously by the solo cellos suites of Bach and Britten, this six-movement concerto was influenced by composer's own close relationship with the instrument (she trained as a cellist at the Yehudi Menuhin School) and also offers a wry comment on the life of a solo cellist in modern times. The movements are unbroken, save for a pause between the Minuet and Sarabande. By turns quirky and gently satirical and yet loaded with unashamedly Romantic gestures and always filled with love and understanding for the cello repertoire it occasionally sends up, *Katharsis* emerged as one of Frances-Hoad's most endearing scores, dryly witty, yet full of humanity. It was played with genuine personality and notable expressive range by soloist Alice Neary, though the string section, expanded for this concert performance, sometimes threatened to overwhelm her more intimate solo lines. The UK premiere of Hannah Lash's *Chaconnes*, for strings combined elements of a repeated ground bass with sonata form, creating cyclic, ever-changing patterns superimposed on traditional, evolutionary procedures. The result was a fascinating hybrid of ear-catching effects and long-term harmonic planning, almost impossible to process entirely on one hearing. It was extremely well played by the Festival Orchestra members, who met all of Lash's practical challenges, while also managing to trace the spectral outline of a familiar form lurking beneath all the pyrotechnics. David Matthews's *White Nights*, for violin and small orchestra, Op 26 was an early work (1980) that had a very clear formal direction as well as an extraordinary sense of colour. Mathilde Milwidsky was the impassioned soloist and woodwind and tuned percussion also made memorable contributions to this directly communicative and imaginatively scored piece. A spirited but predominantly urbane performance of Stravinsky's 'Dumbarton Oaks' Concerto in E flat ended a well-chosen programme that resonated in the mind long after the final notes had faded.

One of this festival's most surprising and memorable concerts took place in the afternoon of 26 August in the form of a recital by the GBSR duo, consisting of percussionist George Barton and pianist Siwan Rhys. They began with an outing for Steve Reich's *Clapping Music* (1971), which was an effective way for the performers to introduce themselves to the audience. Following this was the world premiere of Liam Mattison's *ADULTHOOD*, for piano and percussion, a joint commission from the Presteigne Festival and Royal Philharmonic Society. In this delicate, reflective and very personal piece, reminiscences of childhood created nostalgia for simpler times. Half-remembered nursery rhymes sounded like tantalising glimpses of former certainties. The product of a highly individual creative mind, *ADULTHOOD* succeeded in generating a compelling, authentic world within a brief timespan. Hannah Lash's *C*, for vibraphone and piano (2011) was an entrancing tribute to minimalism, the material growing out of the pounding C-octaves heard at the outset and proceeding in motoric repetitions and mesmeric near-repetitions. After this we heard the first performance of Mark David Boden's *Soliton*, for vibraphone, marimba, temple blocks and piano, commissioned by George Vass for the GBSR duo. Named after a self-reinforcing wave, this compact piece had a clear formal outline with two cascading outer sections (the first beginning with gossamer delicacy, the last ending with fearsome ferocity) framing a more unstable, energised central passage. Making imaginative use of its prudently selected resources, *Soliton* made a powerful impact, thanks in part to the clarity of the composer's

intentions but also due to committed advocacy from the two players. After this we heard another premiere, that of *Boudica*, for percussion and piano by Gregory Rose. Commissioned by the GBSR Duo, this powerful suite depicts various events in the life of the first-century Iceni leader. The appalling violence of the narrative, which included flogging, rape, murder and suicide, was reflected in the music which was divided into four incident-packed movements involving an imposing array of percussion instruments, often performed at white heat and with the greatest vehemence. A visceral piece with the descriptive clarity of a tone poem, *Boudica* made a strong impression in its concert debut and was delivered with the utmost virtuosity and scrupulous fidelity to the score by both performers. Next was Luke Bedford's *Faraway Canons*, for piano and bass drum (2018) in which the bass drum, rumbling initially with baleful restraint, gradually gained in intensity, set against the piano's fluent canonic patterns. Finally, Joe Duddell's *Parallel Lines*, for tuned percussion and piano, already something of a classic of the repertoire, made a satisfying concluding piece as it attempted to achieve parity between the players and their material in the same way as the opening work, *Clapping Music*, had presented the two performers as equals in tandem. In sum, this very enjoyable and wide-ranging collection of pieces emphasised the sheer range of sounds open to the featured instrumental forces. All seven works were superbly played by the GBSR Duo.

The Festival Finale in the evening of 27 August was given by the Presteigne Festival Orchestra under George Vass at St Andrew's. Bringing together several of the festival's thematic strands, the programme was compiled with Vass's customary care and consideration. Martin Butler's *Rondes d'Automne* (2011) made a vital and life-affirming start to the concert, assembling a stirring formal structure from deceptively simple ideas and gestures. It was followed by Deborah Pritchard's *For Mother Earth*, a gentle, prayer-like mediation for strings that included an extended, supplicatory solo for first violin, exquisitely played by the orchestra's leader Sophie Mather. Mathilde Milwidsky brought a fresh and unhackneyed sense of wonder and joy to the solo violin part of Vaughan Williams's *The Lark Ascending* and she received alert and sympathetic support from Vass and his players. After the interval, Katherine Bryan joined the orchestra for the first performance of Hannah Lash's *Fault Lines* for flute and string orchestra. A festival commission, this elaborate and dramatic piece explored the relationship between soloist and ensemble. It was a substantial statement at 15 minutes' duration and George Vass clearly believed in every note of it, holding the score aloft to the audience after the performance. It was a crowd-pleasing show-stopper of undeniable virtuosity and the soloist and the strings all gave of their best, yet I sensed a greater affinity with Lash's intimate scores featured in earlier concerts at the festival as I felt these more personal utterances for modest forces revealed more to me about the composer than the big, showy gestures of *Fault Lines*. A poised and beautifully shaped account of the ballet suite from Copland's *Appalachian Spring* in which the exquisite contributions of leader Sophie Mather and flautist Sarah Bennington merit special praise brought the concert and the festival to a magical conclusion. Vass has a gift for conjuring sounds from nothing and fading them away back into silence almost imperceptibly and the immaculate precision of the players at these crucial points was breathtaking.

2019 proved to be a vintage year for the Presteigne Festival. The standard of playing throughout the event was higher than ever and the number of exciting musical discoveries was exceptional. George Vass's meaningful and effective programme-building is second to none and a great deal of the success of this annual occasion can be attributed to the choice of works and their placing within individual concerts. I look forward very much to next year's series of concerts (27 August–1 September 2020), which will include new pieces from composer-in-residence Tarik O'Regan, Martin Butler, Gary Carpenter, Joseph Phibbs and Emma-Ruth Richards, among others.

Paul Conway