

# WESTERN MAIL

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### PRESTEIGNE FESTIVAL 2019

★★★★★

HIGHLIGHTS of this year's Presteigne Festival included several performances by Alice Neary, principal cellist of the BBC National Orchestra of Wales.

Particularly impressive was Katharsis, a six-movement cello concerto by Cheryl Frances-Hoad, one of the festival's two composers-in-residence. It was performed with enormous eloquence and conviction by Neary with the Presteigne Festival Chamber Orchestra, conducted by the festival's artistic director, George Vass.

Neary was joined by Mathilde Milwidsky (violin) and Sarah-Jane Bradley (viola) for a concert that included the world premiere of a finely crafted string trio by James Francis Brown. She also gave riveting performances of George Crumb's cello sonata and Imogen Holst's exquisite *The Fall of the Leaf* – three short studies on a 16th-century theme – as part of Presteigne Festival Chamber Choir's programme of works on the theme of *O Magnum Mysterium*, joining the choir to provide a radiant obbligato line in *Ola Gjeilo's Serenity*.

Commissioning new music is the admirable USP of Presteigne Festival, and this year's eight world premieres included an effective *Missa Brevis* by Harriet Grainger, a graduate of the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama, performed liturgically at the Festival Eucharist.

A recital by the unusual combination of piano (Siwan Rhys) and percussion (George Barton) included premieres by Gregory Rose (a suite inspired by the violent life and death of Boudica), Liam Mattison and Mark David Boden, all of which made imaginative use of an extensive percussion set-up. The orchestra's first concert opened with the UK premiere of an engaging one-movement concerto for strings by Adrian Williams.

Illness unfortunately prevented harpist Hannah Lash, who shared composer-in-residence status, from making the journey from America to attend, but her music made a strong impression. She creates a unique sound-world that was apparent from the first few chords of works such as *Give me your songs* in pianist Tom Poster's wonderful solo recital; *Chaconnes* for string orchestra; and *Fault Lines* for flute and orchestra, in which Katherine Bryan was the commanding soloist.

Stand-out premiere of the weekend for me, however, was Frances-Hoad's clarinet quintet *Tales of the Invisible*, given a compelling performance by the Albion Quartet and Rozenn le Trionnaire.

Clare Stevens