



NEWSLETTER

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Chairman's Message

One of the benefits of being a member of the Cheltenham Music Festival Society is that we can feel part of the Festival's continuing evolution. It has developed from the narrow objectives of the early days to the present day when under successive directors of music it has broadened its range and its appeal to a wider audience. Certainly, this year, with Meurig Bowen as director, the range of music has never been wider, but he has maintained the central objectives of high quality music and high quality performances.

Included in the diversity this year, we have celebrated the music of Benjamin Britten (one of the earliest supporters of the Festival) and many of the highlights this year have been of performances of his music, including *Noye's Fludde*, the *Young Person's Guide*, the *Serenade for Tenor, Horn and Strings*, the *Violin Concerto* and the three string quartets. The Society is pleased to have been a Principal Partner of the Festival and, in particular, to have supported two concerts, the programme book, and to have contributed to the commissioning of the very successful *Double Concerto for violin and viola* by David Matthews.

It was a pleasure to welcome familiar faces to the AGM which saw the re-election of Jo Miller to the Committee. Tributes were paid to Jill Bacon who is standing down from her position of Social Secretary after eight years. Jill has been the organiser of countless trips, tea parties and receptions as well as the Benefactors' Luncheon and she

will be sadly missed. The Committee is hoping to co-opt a replacement for her in the near future. At the reception which followed we were able to chat over glasses of wine provided by the Music Festival and consume delicious canapes made by our culinarily gifted members to whom we offer heartfelt thanks.

Now that we have come to the end of the special relationship we had with the Membership scheme we are again able to recruit new members, we shall continue in this kind of support in future Festivals. We decided to relaunch the organisation this year and many of you will have seen the handsome new recruitment leaflet which was distributed with the Festival programme book. (If you would like to have further copies to hand out to other music lovers whom you feel would like to join us, please contact the Membership Secretary or refer them to our website www.cmfsoc.org.uk/membership/.)

We intend to concentrate on education, new music and young performers. Alongside these objectives we shall continue to publish the newsletter, to arrange the reception and special lunches during the Festival and to organise social events for members during the rest of the year. Above all we intend to make a difference – both to the Festival itself and to the enjoyment of the members.

Jim Harrison

After 2013 What Next?

This is the question that a number of concertgoers have been asking, and having discovered a document marked TOP SECRET blowing around in the breeze we are able to spill the beans.

Next year will be the 70th Cheltenham Music Festival, so expect something special. There will be the premiere of

Richard Blackford's *The Great Animal Orchestra* – billed as a multimedia event – and a premiere from John Tavener whose 70th birthday falls next year. Works by Graham Fitkin, Huw Watkins, Gavin Higgins, Judith Weir, John Woolrich and Nicola LeFanu and other composers will also receive first performances.

The line-up of performers is starting to shape up. Nicola Benedetti returns with her Trio, this time in a directorial role. (Warning to Meurig: Beware – when these Scots lassies take over, there's no stopping them!) Among the other musicians invited to Cheltenham are Mark Padmore, Benjamin Grosvenor, the Brodsky Quartet, the Hilliard Ensemble and Norwegian saxophonist Jan Garbarek. The editorial team will be keeping their ears to the ground in the hope of discovering more details of the 2014 Festival and, if successful, will report on their findings in the November/December issue of this newsletter. The Festival runs from July 2nd to 13th 2013.



The Lighthouse Keepers – Photo Phil Stapleton

Audience Reaction

Five of the Best

The five concerts I attended this year all had something special and memorable. The most surprising was that given by Chetham's Symphony Orchestra on 6th July. A splendid *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* and a truly committed performance by Callum Snart in the rarely heard Britten *Violin Concerto* was followed by a dazzling account of Shostakovich's *Fifth Symphony*, arguably this composer's greatest work and certainly my favourite. I have heard it dozens of times, but never played as wonderfully as this. The enthusiasm and joy displayed by the young members of the orchestra and their conductor came across to the audience whose loud applause emphasised what a treat we had witnessed. Congratulations are due to all involved. The future of music in Britain is in safe hands, and I wish them well.

The *Two Pianos Four Hands* programme given by Joseph Tong and Waka Hasegawa, which took place two days earlier, displayed how well the two pianists played together, although I found the first half of their recital rather uninspiring. The "special" part was to come with their playing of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* – always very effective in the two piano version. It was a pity they were tempted to add an indifferent piece by Poulence as an encore which somewhat took away the thrill of hearing *The Rite*.

It was good to hear on 9th July Schubert's *String Quintet*, a great Cheltenham favourite and one of those miraculous works of which one never tires. Written in the composer's final year it was described in the Programme Book as "one of the supreme masterpieces of chamber music", a view which I share totally. Sublime playing by the Signum Quartet and Leonard Elshenbroich made this a special occasion.

Two more chamber music masterpieces were given by the Benedetti Trio on 11th July. The Beethoven *Archduke Trio* was a star item for the pianist Alexei Grynyuk whose playing tended to overwhelm the others, which I think was the composer's intention. A better balanced performance of the superb Tchaikovsky *Trio* followed. It is good to know that Nicola, a delight as ever, will be a principal guest at next year's festival.

My final concert which I attended on 12th July was a first class recital by the gifted young pianist Boris Giltburg. The two major works he chose – Schumann's *Carnaval* and Liszt's great *Piano Sonata* require great skill and this was very much on show here. Two short pieces by Prokofiev and Rachmaninov were added for good measure.

Many thanks, as ever, are due to Meurig for all the hard work he does to make the Festival so successful. I shall look forward to celebrating the 70th Festival next year.

WLH

Excellence and Quality

Schubert gave us his sublime *String Quintet*. At the end of his life. Britten said, "Look at me: I'm dying." with his embarrassing and maudlin *String Quartet No 3*. One was struck by the difference in a fine morning concert by the Signum Quartet.

The Chetham Symphony Orchestra give us hope for the future of orchestral playing with their concert, and the exciting *Shostakovich No 5* ended their concert on a high note.

Laurence Power with Simon Crawford-Phillips, Clara Mouriz with the Signum Quartet and the London Conchord Ensemble were the high points. If you're looking for a good holiday look no further than the Cheltenham Music Festival.

The Elgar *Violin Sonata* played by Laurence Power; the Mozart *Wind Quintet* and the Beethoven *Wind Quintet* played by the London Conchord Ensemble were of high quality and that tells us cultural excellence and quality of standards must be maintained. We must always look up and never dumb down.

A chance was missed to cover the Verdi bicentenary with some of his songs or sacred pieces. And surely Christopher Cook ought to be recognised for his years of hard work for the Festival? Thank you to Meurig Bowen and his team for another good Festival.

AH, NF

Disappointing Surgery

The *World of Surgery* triad of talks this year was most disappointing compared with last year's *Musical Athletes* series. The connection between a display of surgical instruments which looked as though they last saw service at the Battle of Trafalgar (only joking!) and a beautiful work of art which a new lute is was negligible and the performance of a trainee surgeon in no way compares to the conductor of a symphony orchestra!

VF



Michelangelo Drawing Blood – Photo Phil Stapleton

Delights, Disappointments and Gallant Tries

This was a fascinating Festival, as ever, with Meurig Bowen's stamp all over it, many unexpected delights, a few disappointments and some gallant tries.

The major disappointment, with which I know that many others concur, was the production of *Noye's Fludde* in Tewkesbury Abbey, placed half-way down the nave, as far as I could make out, on a central metal scaffolding island, two storeys high, scaffold pole railings hung with banners or the like, plus what appeared to be silver birch tree trunks, all of which conspired to mask what seemed to be lots of children scurrying about. At one stage children could – just – be seen stroking the birch trunks, presumably to symbolize the construction of the ship. An orchestra at floor level was almost hidden from sight [and sound] by the scaffolding poles supporting the "action level".

What a contrast this made with the production in the Town Hall during the 2004 Festival in which all the action was clearly visible (including the assembly of the ship by the children and the entry of the animals), all speech was clearly audible and intelligible, and, (as in the original Aldeburgh production) pottery mugs were struck by the children with wooden spoons rather than, so far as I could make out, handbells. The Town Hall production was moving; this was not.

My major highlights of this year's Festival were :

- * The recital of British music by Lawrence Power – the first half using the viola, on which he is justly world-renowned, the second on the violin. These were superb performances, every one of them, notwithstanding the fundamental difference in performing technique. The violin uses the edge of the bowstrings; the viola uses them flat.
- * Chetham's concert on Saturday, 6 July with fine performances by orchestra and soloist Callum Smart of the rarely heard Britten *Violin Concerto* and magnificent Shostakovich 5, as good as any I have ever heard.
- * The Pump Room morning concerts – all good to splendid. *Two Piano Four Hands* was an unusual combination, by Joseph Tong and his Japanese wife, Waka Hasegawa, with Stravinsky's *Firebird* in its original form outstanding. I was less keen on Christianne Stotijn, mezzo, with Imogen Cooper; her diction was poor, her voice somewhat plummy and in my opinion, more suited to opera – where it is a common view that the words are unimportant,



Christianne Stotijn, mezzo with Imogen Cooper
– Photo Phil Stapleton

unlike in Lieder where they are. The Belcea Quartet were fine as ever despite two changes in personnel, but somewhat swamped by Till Fellner's contribution to Dvorak's *Piano Quintet*. (This is far from unusual as many pianists fail to take adequate account of the increased power of modern pianos in relation to the softer tone known to composers well into the 19th century. Alexei Grynyuk was the same with Nicola Benedetti's Trio and piano trios, quartets and quintets have broken up for this very reason - one local example being the Carducci Quartet, originally a piano quartet, who had to transmogrify into a string quartet.

I have mixed feelings about the choral concerts. All were of high quality, but Italian sacred music from the 16th and 17th centuries can easily sound very samey. The Royal Holloway choir were as good as their growing reputation, and the combined choirs totalling over 200 singers in Gloucester Cathedral were phenomenal, with superb diction, every word intelligible. I knew from my several CDs of choirs with smaller forces conducted by Stephen Layton that he was good, yet was surprised just how good. There was also a magnificent performance of Poulenc's *Organ Symphony*, which I last heard live in Bern in 1967, when I was working in Switzerland

We had a mixed bag in the Parabola. The film of Durham Miners' Hymns was not really about hymns, but mainly about numerous aspects of their lives, below ground and above, and their moving stoicism. The *Academy Showcase* gave us samples of the Academy members' work with a wind and string ensemble: short pieces, mainly exercises in the tonalities which could be achieved, few, if any, of which were destined for further performance, but all worthy. I have mixed feelings about the Michelangelo event with its exercises in the creation of sculptures, balletic movement and poses, by the artist and a very well-endowed naked young man – all to vaguely baroque music played on period instruments, with contributions by a counter-tenor, who had to struggle at times to reach or sustain some of the high notes.

The "What it is like to be a..." series was fascinating, highlights being the Carducci Quartet (two married couples, each with young children) on many aspects of their professional and domestic lives, and Mikel Toms (English, despite his name) on two aspects of a conductor's life – competitions, and rehearsing an orchestra.

Dame Felicity Lott was on fine form with the Royal Holloway Choir – still as arch as ever when given the opportunity.

We popped in to the Gamelin Concert in the Pump Room, which was interesting but not for long with its very stylised instrumental and vocal music and very limited range. Tony Palmer's film on the life of Benjamin Britten might have been more interesting if I hadn't seen it before and, in particular, if he had not insisted on it being played at deafening maximum volume in the swelteringly hot Oval Room at the Pump Room.

Richard III

A Festival Pleasing to the Eye and Ear

In his poem 'Summer Images', John Clare (1793-1864) wrote

"..... all around

Much beauty intervenes,

Filling with harmony the ear and eye"

Although not writing about music, his words are appropriate to describe the delights of the Pump Room during this Music Festival. Much will have been said and written about the music (the ear), but I want to give my personal view on the two floral arrangements (the eye).

Over the years there have been acceptable, weird and wonderful and downright ghastly displays. Some people would have appreciated garish colours, overblown blooms and contrived 'artistic' references to music, but it would be difficult to fault this year's displays which were exquisite.

They did not attract the eye so much that attention was diverted from the music, but added an aura of joy. Expensive they surely are, but the pleasure that flowers bring to the Pump Room audiences are well worth the expense.

AD

Forthcoming Opera Trips

Tickets have been purchased for *Anna Bolena* (Donizetti) (WNO) in Cardiff on Friday 27 September. Simon Rees, formerly the dramaturg of WNO, will talk about the opera at 7.00 pm on Wednesday 18 September at St Andrew's Church, Montpellier Street.

Tickets have been reserved for two other operas by the WNO in Cardiff: *Boulevard Solitude* (Henze, based on the Manon story) on Wednesday 26 February and *Nabucco* (Verdi) on Saturday 31 May. Simon Rees will give talks about each of these operas before we go to them (dates to be confirmed).

Robert Padgett, Chairman of the Cheltenham Opera Society, will give a talk "Lowlights of opera: Basses, Baritones and Mezzos" at 3.00 pm on Sunday 10 November at St Andrew's Church. There won't be much talk. It will consist of cds and dvds of arias and duets by some of the best singers from the last 50 years. There will be tea in the interval. Entry is £5 for anyone who is not a member of the Opera Society.

To get on the mailing list for opera trips, send your address, phone number and e-mail address to Robert Padgett, 14 Century Court, Montpellier Grove, Cheltenham GL50 2XR, 01242 571802, robertpadgett@btinternet.com.

Remembering Ivor Gurney

There is a brace of concerts in Gloucester Cathedral on Saturday 31st August to celebrate the Gloucestershire poet and composer Ivor Gurney with a view to commissioning a stained glass window in his memory. Dame Felicity Lott and Sarah Connolly will give a recital in the morning at 11 pm with poems read by Simon Callow. An evening concert

featuring soloists, the English Chamber Orchestra and Tenebrae conducted by Adrian Partington starts at 7 pm.

Programme details of the new season of Cheltenham Contemporary Concerts and Cheltenham Music Society are enclosed.

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