



# NEWSLETTER

August 2012

CHELTENHAM MUSIC FESTIVAL SOCIETY

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## Festival Reflections from Meurig Bowen

The post-festival August issue is where, traditionally, you the audience post your comments and conflated reviews. I look forward to reading them, and will no doubt respond in the next issue. In the meantime, with my summer holiday still a few weeks away, here are some initial thoughts. And it seems best to refer first to what other people said about the programme.

Hugh Canning in *The Sunday Times* thought it 'one of the best Cheltenham in years'. Richard Morrison in *The Times* described the programme as 'wonderfully eclectic,' and Andrew Clements in the *Guardian* wrote in a preview piece that the Music Festival has 'recovered much of its sense of identity and purpose over the last few years...with arts budgets being squeezed, the thrifty ambition that's gone into the 12-day programme curated by artistic director Meurig Bowen is remarkably imaginative.' For someone with a job like mine, you can't hope for write-ups better than that.

We got a record number of excellent reviews in the national media, particularly for the Nash Ensemble, BBC Singers and Time Capsule concerts. Our Musical Athletes series was featured on Radio 4's Today programme, and made appearances on TV as far afield as China and Brazil. The *Daily Telegraph* thought our Time Capsule: 1914-18 'a fascinating overview', and the *Independent* on Sunday described it as 'a model of how to weave a strong narrative across several events...the This may seem perverse - and I don't want to downplay the quality of the 'grown-up' offerings, which pleased me enormously - but some of the events that made the most impact on me were our events for children and families. I don't often ask people back in successive years, but it's an indication of how strong they all were that it's likely the 2013 festival will include James Mayhew, Pluck and Dominic Harlan again. For those of you who were at Harlan's hugely original and inspiring show 'When Yesterday We Met' will know why I can confidently say it was one of the most extraordinary things I have ever witnessed.

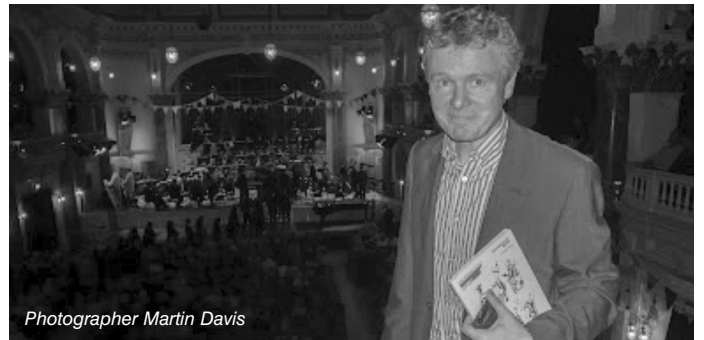
One of the reasons Dominic Harlan has created what he has is to generate a sense of comfort with, and excitement in children for 'art song'. Wouldn't it be wonderful if a generation was brought up thinking it entirely normal and lovely to listen to a trained singer and pianist

## Jubilee Decorations in the Town Hall

A number of people commented on the colourful bunting in the Town Hall. This was a Festival Project to mark both the Diamond Jubilee and the London Olympics which brought together groups from different sections of the local community to learn new skills and ideas while working alongside local artists. Each group individually marked, dressed and decorated their flags, taking their cues from the vibrant colours and artistic idioms of selected Commonwealth countries, and from royal pageantry.

The participants were Glenfall, St John's and Charlton Kings Primary Schools, the National Star College, children from Rosehill Street (Street Party competition following the recent gas explosion), the children's art group from Cheltenham School of Fine Art, ArtAble, (an adult group with difficulties and disabilities from Deep Space Studios) and residents from the Knole (care home of Langley House Trust).

Project director Niki Whitfield would like to thank all the individual artists and helpers who gave their time to go into the various settings and to help make up the bunting: especially Jaynie Tricker, Gillian Lever and Nettie Brooks at Koko Hairdressing. And a big thank you to Glenfall Primary School and the Trafford Fund for donating materials and helping to fund the project.



Photographer Martin Davis

performing songs by Schubert, Rachmaninov, Faure or Britten? We continue to present wonderful song recitals in Cheltenham - think of Toby Spence and Florian Boesch last year, James Gilchrist and the Prince Consort this year. But alas, we continue to struggle to generate the same size of audience that we do, say, for pianists and string quartets. It was ever thus, I am told, and the song recital following that the Wigmore Hall enjoys is sadly the exception that proves the rule nationally (except for bespoke Lieder festivals in Oxford and Leeds).

I am not going to give up though! And to those of you reading this now who tend to steer clear of Lieder and song in Cheltenham, I ask two things of you here: i) please let me know what it is that switches you off/what & who might conversely attract you and ii) unless you are so vehemently anti singers, please give song a go next year! Singing has always been a big part of my life, and I think I have pretty good judgment on that front. Trust me - please! If I had £100 for every audience member who comes up to me after a Pump Room feast of fine singing and says something along the lines of 'That was amazing - it's such a pity more people weren't there to witness it', I'd be having to find myself a dodgy offshore accountant to do something creative with my swollen earnings.

Thank you so much for your support of the Music Festival, though your continued subscription and through your attendance of the concerts themselves.

*This was Diamond Jubilee Year for our Society so we celebrated with a delicious Jubilee Cake baked by Jo Miller and eaten with relish by all at the Members' Reception.*



# Members' Feedback on the 2012 Music Festival

## *Dynamic Playing from Norwegian Musicians*

The 1914-18 concerts gave us some of the best playing heard in the Festival and the news bulletins which Julia Somerville devised and read added flavour to the series. Henning Kraggerud, Christian Ihle Hadland and Adrian Brendel were outstanding, and the Janacek Violin Sonata from the first two was a gem. Could the duo come back next year and play all the Brahms sonatas?

Christian's dynamics should be a lesson to other pianists heard in this Festival. The Elgar *Piano Quintet* actually became a sextet with the pianist stamping her way through every movement. In future if concerts are to be amplified I feel there should be some indication either in the brochure or the programme book.

This was an excellent programme. Maybe some pagan sun music would have given us better weather!

NF, AH

## *Divine Music in three different Festival venues*

My husband and I attended five concerts in this year's Festival, and two concerts really stood out for us. The first was the Bolivian Baroque at Pittville Pump Room on 8th July. The sound and flexibility of the young voices was most impressive and often moving. Our other favourite was the concert by I Fagiolini and the Oriel Singers in Tewkesbury Abbey on 9th July who blended together to produce the most wonderful music in the Abbey.

One of my personal highlights was the sublime singing of Laurence Kilsby in Handel's *Eternal Source of Light Divine* in the Royal Musical Treasures concert on 8th July. However, although the performances by Cheltenham Bach Choir, Tewkesbury Schola Cantorum and Flowers Band were excellent, this concert was spoiled for us by the long passages of narration, which we couldn't hear very well anyway despite the fact that we were sitting in the front row. We felt that a narrator was superfluous, as detailed notes were given in the Programme, and the narration completely detracted from the music.

AW

## *London Marathon Concert commemorates new London Landmark*

Following on from Elgar's *Cockaigne* Hannah Kendall's premiere work *Shard* took a more contemporary view of London focusing on a modern controversial building which as only just been completed. Bouncing motifs over long low notes depicted the changing rays of reflected light above the solid and stable structure. A darker coloured section cast a gloomier shadow. Using a full range of percussion the orchestra gave a descriptive and powerful performance which was enthusiastically received.

Anon

## *... But Explanations were needed*

Because music is a dynamic art, Meurig Bowen is rightly to be commended for including unfamiliar modern works in the Festival concert programmes. However, when such a composition is featured in one of the concerts, ordinary members of the audience would find it helpful if arrangements were made to ensure that the accompanying programme notes include some explanatory information about the form, structure, thematic elements and orchestration of the work, and their relationship to its title. I found it disappointing that the programme notes which accompanied the excellent London Marathon concert on 15 July provided no such information about Hannah Kendall's "Shard", and, although I enjoyed listening to it, I would have appreciated it more if such information had been made available."

DD

## *Fine tribute to Ivor Gurney*

Having lived through WW2 I really did not wish to revisit WW1. However the biographical play/recital 'A Soldier and a Maker' by Ian Burnside was most beautifully produced, in particular the lighting depicting both the desolation of the battle field and the Gloucestershire countryside which inspired Ivor Gurney's poems and music.

I did not really expect to see Lucia Puccini at the Festival as much of the music was English. However I was astonished the catch a glimpse of her in a 'Burberry' in Tewkesbury. Perhaps the flooded car park inspired the thought that the English do dress suitably on occasion. I hope she was suitably impressed by the truly magnificent concert by I Fagiolini.

VF

## *Applause for Grosvenor, Tan, Brabbins and BSO*

In Ravel's exploration of virtuoso pianism in *Gaspard de la nuit* Benjamin Grosvenor's range and variety were stunning; the piano shrieked and tinkled, roared and dreamt. Peter Newham predicted his quality and was amply justified.

What a surprise that Melvyn Tan turned out to be looking so trim, sprightly but contained; he performed Schumann with extraordinary warmth and breadth while capturing all the composer's impulsiveness.

How clear and Holst's *Hammersmith Suite* sounded after Elgar's *Cockaigne*, and what lovely tones we heard from the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra in the London Marathon Concert. Each of the very diverse pieces was directed with insight and character. Bravissimo, Brabbins.

However in the *1918 Concert* without some form of excellence, narrative skill, piquancy and irony this work sounded manufactured and disagreeable until some brief spirit in the final part. This is what happened without Nigel Kennedy.

My congratulations and thanks to all concerned in the condition and management of the pianos, the halls and the seating – all of which were excellent.

AVH

## *Choral Concerts make a Big Impression*

The concert at Tewkesbury Abbey (I Fagiolini, the Oriel Singers, the English Cornett and Sackbutt Ensemble, the City Musick, Fretwork and The Rose Consort of Viols) made a lasting impression with glorious music and beautiful voices.

Bach's *B Minor Mass* at St Paul's Church by the large Utrecht Student Choir and Orchestra was yet another memorable concert; it was good to see the church packed to capacity. Both soprano and alto soloists had lovely voices and were a delight to hear, as were the choir and orchestra. Possibly a few more young male voices would have helped to balance the overall sound, but that is nit-picking.

The first Sunday gave us the opportunity to hear the Arakaendar Bolivia Choir in partnership with the Baroque instrumental ensemble Florilegium singing some of the recently discovered unique and original Bolivian Baroque music from the Jesuit missions. It was joyous, exciting and refreshingly different from its European counterpart, and as an encore the choir sang one of its own charming Bolivian folk songs. I hope to hear them again in future years.

A further highlight was the new play by Iain Burnside, *A Soldier and a Maker*, at the Parabola Arts Centre based on the songs, letters and poems of Ivor Gurney – an admirable performance by both actors and singers.

How this contrasted with *Before Life and After* featuring the poems of Thomas Hardy set to music by Britten, Finzi and Tippett.

# Members' Feedback on the 2012 Music Festival (cont)

Filmmaker Netia Jones placed these songs in the long silent night passed by a nightwatchman in an abandoned station building. I found the words sung by James Gilchrist difficult to hear and the video behind intrusive, irritating and gimmicky, but couldn't fault the accompanist, Anna Tilbrook.

Thank you, Meurig for putting the whole Festival programme together, and thank you also to your colleagues.

JM

## **Loud accompaniment obscured the words**

I went to *African Sanctus* not knowing what to expect. I imagined an African choir and their music and was very surprised at what was in store for me. I thought the choir worked really hard, as it was difficult music to sing, and I was particularly impressed with the youth choir. The accompanists were excellent though loud which made the words inaudible. It was a pity that the talk was not given before the concert instead of afterwards because this might have helped me to understand David Fanshawe's intentions better.

I found the performance very loud with repetitive beats. A lady near me swayed and nodded all the way through, which was a big distraction. I expected her to take off at any time and dance down the aisle. Would I want to listen to another performance? No, I do not think so.

I discovered later that copies of the words were available and having them would have been an advantage for the Liz Lane *Spirit of Africa* piece. Here surtitles would have been more helpful as the loud music made it impossible to hear the words.

RMH

## **Excellent Performances compensate for Initial Disappointment**

Let's start with the "Bottom Line". When the booking form arrived, in February, for the new Festival, I felt a significant disappointment. This was, on paper, for me, the least 'exciting' Cheltenham programme I could remember, and I have been coming since 1973. I appreciate that a lot of this is down to my own personal tastes – I don't like Debussy much (especially the piano music!) and I don't like Delius. I was also very disappointed at the absence (without any comment!) of the Festival Academy – for me such a strong, and important, feature of the festival for the last seven years. The net result was that I 'only' bought tickets for 21 events at this festival, compared with 26 last year and over 30 in most of the years since 2000 – when there was, of course, a longer festival.

So what did I make of the concerts which I did come to? The Pittville Morning Chamber concerts, the 'backbone' of the Festival, are now down to nine in total, since they no longer occur on Saturdays apparently, and I went to seven of those (carefully avoiding Debussy Piano Music and Brahms *Liebeslieder!*) and they were boosted by a significant number of afternoon and evening chamber concerts, all of which I went to. The main feature this year, partly driven by the 1914-18 'time capsule' format, was that almost all the concerts had significant changes of personnel between different works within the concerts - which overall I found irritating. The only two concerts where the personnel did not change were the excellent Castalian Quartet 'modern' concert and Henning Kraggerud's solo recital at Quenington. In particular I felt sympathy for the excellent Escher Quartet who still haven't been able to give a full concert of their own at the Festival – their debut concert last year was also 'shared'!

That did not stop there being some excellent performances of individual works – my own favourites were the Escher's Mendelssohn and Bartok, all of Kraggerud's Ysaye sonatas, the Kodaly *Duo*, Ravel *Piano Trio*, Fauré *Cello Sonata* and the (over the top maybe, but very exciting and moving) Elgar *Piano Quintet*

in the Town Hall.

I went to two excellent choral concerts – the Wellensian Consort at Deerhurst and I Fagiolini at Tewkesbury.

It was a great pity that so much of the really 'new' music was squeezed into a single concert by the BBC Singers (which I opted to miss, a decision I later regretted). The only premieres I heard were the Goehr *Horn Trio* - instantly forgettable, and Hannah Kendall's *Shard* - which was fine as far as it went. The most exciting 'modern' music I heard, by some way, was the excerpts from Swayne's *Missa Tiburtina* at Deerhurst.

What I hadn't anticipated, from the brochure, was the way in which the last weekend became a mini "Holst Festival" with *Hammersmith*, the *Vedic Hymns*, the *Rig Veda* choruses and, above all, *Savitri*. Sarah Connolly's portrayal of the title part was, for me, by a long way the finest performance of the Festival.

There were also still some issues in getting from one performance to another. In particular, were we expected to be able to go to both the *1915 Concert* and the Rachmaninov *Vespers* (as I would have liked)? I decided it was going to be too much of a rush, and only booked for the earlier one (another sale lost!) – and felt vindicated when the concert didn't end until 2120 hrs.

Finally, back to the Festival Academy. I got the impression, though no one would actually say so, that we are never going to see it again. So can I just say that I thought it was one of the best features of recent Festivals and that I am very sorry to see it go. We Brummies have in fact already gained significantly from it – Zoe Beyers, who was a 'pupil' in the first two years of the Academy, is now the much loved Deputy Leader of the CBSO!

ABC

## **Comments from a Tricentarian**

This is my 40th year attending the Cheltenham Festival of Music during which time I have heard 300 concerts. This year I booked for three.

The first was the Pittville morning concert given by the Nash Ensemble on 5th July. The rather tedious *Largo Siciliano* of Alexander Goehr and even more inconsequential *Phantasy* of Frank Bridge did not sit happily sandwiched between Mozart's bright *First Piano Quartet* and the superb Brahms *Trio for violin, horn and piano*. The Nash were excellent, as ever, in the all four works, but the supreme quality of the two principal composers completely outshone the others.

The second, *African Sanctus*, despite its noble intentions did not work for me at all.

A programme with the word "Marathon" in it has got to have something to do with Martyn Brabbins whose three "a-thons" gave me such pleasure during his time as Festival Director. His concert of English music connected with London was as enjoyable as I expected it to be. Elgar's *Cockaigne* provided an appropriately rousing start and his well-loved *Cello Concerto* so beautifully performed by Steven Isserlis was a particular delight. It was good to hear Holst's *Hammersmith* and also John Ireland's *London Overture*, once a very popular work, but now rather sadly neglected. Hannah Kendall's short new work *Shard* was a good effort, but about as dull as the building it is supposed to represent. Such a concert would have to finish with Vaughan Williams' *London Symphony* depicting a city of fogs, Westminster chimes, hansom cabs and the cries of flower-sellers – a bit different from the Olympics obsessed one we know today, but full of exciting and evocative sounds so typical of this composer. A grand finale indeed!

Thanks to everyone for making the Festival such a success.

WLH

*Continued on back page*

## Members' Feedback on the 2012 Music Festival

Continued from page 3

### Bunting degraded Town Hall

I did a survey by asking 20 people not known to me, and they all said the same – they didn't like them. They also said a lot more! What were they talking about? The "flags", "bunting", or whatever name you choose to indicate the assorted bits of cloth hanging in the Town Hall. One of my respondents said they looked like childrens' old clothes that had been cut up, as she used to do for their village fete. Initially I thought they were up for the Singaporean orchestra – some sort of ritual associated with a performance in their country – but when they were still in situ during the remainder of the Festival I realised they were a permanent feature. I don't care what the thinking was behind such an abhorrence; I and at least 20 others considered it a feature that degraded the Town Hall.

AD

### Notes from Italy

This year I was bombarded with invitations from your Festival Director urging me to come to the Festival. Unfortunately, I was too busy to attend the first week, as my niece Giulietta from Verona was picked to represent Italy in beach volleyball at the London Olympic Games, and I had to design her sports outfit. Italy may have failed to win any medals at this sport, but everybody agreed Giulietta looked sensational.

I arrived in Cheltenham in time to hear the Trondheim Soloists whose ladies epitomised Nordic cool in their steel blue silken skirts. By comparison the Savitri Choir looked a little drab. I realise wearing Indian saris might have been considered OTT, especially for the men, but I feel a compromise between traditional Indian design and Italian chic would have worked well for them.

I adored the pretty floral country garden dress worn by Ruby Hughes on the final Sunday morning; it brought back fond memories of my visit to Anne Hathaway's Cottage. Unfortunately, Benedict Nelson let the side down in his recital of sea songs. Why on earth didn't he put on that Jolly Jack Tar uniform he wore in ENO's *Billy Budd*?

Lucia Puccini, Milano

### Cheltenham Music Festival Society Committee 2012-13

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## Cheltenham Opera Society Trips

Tickets have been booked for the WNO in Cardiff to see *Jephtha* (Handel) on Thursday 4 October 2012 and *Lulu* (Berg) on Friday 8 February 2013. Simon Rees, the former dramaturg of the WNO, will come and talk about *Jephtha* and *Lulu* at 7.00 pm on Wednesday 19 September at St Andrew's Church, Montpellier Street. This event is free for members of the Cheltenham Music Festival Society. (Booking forms have been sent out for *Jephtha* but not yet for *Lulu*).

A booking has also been made for *The Minotaur* (Harrison Birtwistle) at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden on Monday 21 January 2013. Robert Padgett, Chairman of the Cheltenham Opera Society, will talk about the opera at 7.00 pm on Thursday 17 January at St Andrew's Church. This is free for members.

Bookings have been made for *Medea* (Charpentier), a French baroque version of the mythical story, by the ENO at the Coliseum in London on Thursday 28 February 2013 and *Lohengrin* (Wagner) by the WNO in Cardiff on Sunday 26 May 2013. We also expect to book for *Madama Butterfly* (WNO) in Birmingham on Friday 14 June.

If you would like to go to operas and you have not already given him your details, please 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.

## CMFS Members' Opera Outings

Trip to MTW **Opera Double Bill** at Sherman Theatre, Cardiff

Friday 2nd November 2012

*In the Locked Room* by Huw Watkins, libretto by David Harsent adapted from a short story by Thomas Hardy. A closed door that sparks an obsession so strong the boundaries between reality and fantasy begin to blur. With Ruby (Songs of the Exotic) Hughes as Ella.

*Ghost Patrol* by Stuart McRae, libretto by Louise Welsh (crime novelist). A modern day bar where three people trying to escape their past collide uncovering a terrible secret and unleashing inevitable tragedy – secrets and their consequences.

Michael Rafferty conducts Music Theatre Wales Ensemble.

Pre-show talk at 6.30pm; Operas at 7.30pm

Depart Racecourse P&R: 3.30pm; Town Hall: approx 3.45pm; Westal Green: 3.50pm

**Cost £38** inclusive of coach and tickets. Please reply to Jill Bacon on enclosed booking form by **Friday 7th September**. Email [jill.bacon@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:jill.bacon@blueyonder.co.uk)

There is a café/bar at the Sherman Theatre where you can order drinks and simple snack food or eat a picnic tea on the coach/minibus.

Trip to **Olney** and *The Yellow Sofa* (Glyndebourne TO) at Wavendon (Bucks)

Friday November 30th 2012

*The Yellow Sofa*, a new opera by Julian Philips, is the story of love and loss, of betrayal and deception, of sex and a city, of wounded pride and attempted retribution – of plumply inviting sofa cushions. Commissioned by Glyndebourne with a text by Edward Kemp, it is based on a short story by Eca de Querios. Writing about Lisbon's bourgeois society towards the end of the 19th century, Querios is a shrewd observer of the human condition and writes with an intriguing mix of gentle satire and wry humour. All of this is reflected in the music, which also draws on the rich tradition of Portuguese folk song.

The performance sung in English takes place at The Stables, Wavendon, established by Cleo Laine and the late John Dankworth. There is a pre-show talk at 2.30pm before the 80 minute opera which starts at 3.00pm.

We will stop in the charming small town of Olney on the way for coffee and/or lunch, to visit the church where John Newton was incumbent and to visit the Cowper/Newton Museum (optional - entrance fees not included).

Depart Racecourse P & R: 8.15am; Charlton Kings Sixways: approx 8.30am

**Cost £37 (opera and travel only)**. Entry to the museum at Olney is £4 and entry into Museum Garden is £1.50. Replies please to Jill Bacon on booking form by **Monday 10th September**. Tel: **01242 231615**.

NB. Members living in other parts of the UK who would like to join us at this opera performance should send an sae and cheque for £15. Wavendon is south east of Milton Keynes close to Junction 13 on the M1 and the A421/A5130 junction. It is also close to Woburn Sands railway station on the Bletchley-Bedford line. Jill Bacon can offer more detailed directions on receipt of your application.