

Thursday

Concert 1 at 1300

David Adams, violin, Charlotte Bonneton, viola, and Olivier Stankiewicz, oboe, just three of the five original artists were joined on the day by cellist, Christopher Graves, and pianist, Ben Frith. These talented musicians were able to cover the original challenging and unusual programme and did so with apparent ease and much conviction.

Britten's *Fantasy Quartet* for oboe and strings is an early Britten piece influenced by his teacher Frank Bridge and written for the legendary oboist Leon Goosens. The Quartet opens with a muted staccato motif with an oboe line in contrast - this was quite breathtaking. The second movement is lyrical, led by the viola and expanding into a more energetic string section. The playing was completely convincing. And so to the final movement with its walking movement and brilliant oboe part. It was almost impossible to believe that we heard such perfection remembering the chaos before the Festival got under way.

In the opening movement of Mendelssohn's Piano Trio Op. 66 we hear first a spinning-wheel melody revealing a superb feeling and balance between the piano and strings. In piano trios, the piano can often be too prominent - no problem here. The second movement includes a conversation between the strings, the piano providing background - magical and superbly played. There is then one of those Mendelssohnian Midsummer Nights with fabulous virtuoso fairy-like elegance. And so to the final expansive lyrical finale - hard to believe such sounds came from just three musicians. This concert was incredible start to the Festival.

Concert 2 at 1800

The Thursday early evening concert was probably the event most disrupted by the loss of Kate and Dan, since the Schumann *Romances* for oboe and piano and Kate's *Le Corps des Cordes* fell out of the programme. The latter was admirably replaced by Olivier's rendering of a Bach *Partita*, a masterclass in both playing from memory and in breath control, and this sounded glorious in the St Paul's acoustic. This was preceded by the Mozart String Quartet in D Minor – those of us who are unfamiliar with it were not surprised to learn from the usual excellent programme note that it was a composition that had not come together easily. The Castalian Quartet delicately negotiated the work's gear changes, bringing out its muted colours to full effect.

The concert concluded with Fanny Mendelssohn's String Quartet in E Flat, a markedly cheerful contrast to the Mozart, being full of energy and colour and providing an exhilarating end to the evening. The Castalians again demonstrated their extraordinary focus and provided an immediate justification (if anyone needs one) for the renewed interest in the composer's work and the modern regret that the social mores of her time and a relatively short life inhibited an even greater flowering of her talent.

Following the concert members of our Friends scheme enjoyed a wine reception with a chance to chat to many of the artists.

Friday

Open rehearsal at 1030

The six instrumentalists playing the Brahms Sextet were meeting for the first time, and as they began the play-through the audience will have been struck by how far advanced towards performance they seemed already to be! It was absorbing to witness the team work and the development of the performance over the hour.

Daniel Tong's talk at 1415 This was very interesting, well delivered and relevant to the afternoon's concert. Such a pre-concert talk is a really good feature, particularly when well done, as here.

Concert 3 at 1500

An attractive programme, with each item involving a different group or single performer: oboe quartet, piano solo, oboe and piano, and string quartet. This worked well, and was a clever outcome, given the rescheduling that had been forced on the Festival.

In the Mozart, oboist, Olivier Stankiewicz, again displayed his warm and clear instrumental sound. The lively character of the Quartet's outer movements were beautifully conveyed, contrasting with the introspective mood of the middle movement. The whole performance was elegant and seemingly effortless.

Daniel Tong performed Schubert's *Six Moments Musicaux*, emphasising the particular character of each, and conveying the quality of the group as a whole. For Schumann's *3 Romances* for Oboe and Piano he was joined by Olivier Stankiewicz for a most assured and attractive performance.

Felix Mendelssohn's substantial String Quartet in F minor, dating from the last months of his life, completed the programme after the interval. The Castalians' whole-hearted commitment in performance, and their response to the very differing moods of the quartet's four movements, made this a memorable conclusion to a concert of variety and interest.

Concert 4 at 2045 Scandinavian Fiddle Evening

A fresh breeze of Scandinavian music blew into St Paul's Church for this evening concert invigorating both folk and classical music traditions. Glass of wine in hand, we were in for a treat.

For the first part of the concert, Sini Simonen, the Finnish-born leader of the Castalian Quartet, together with past and present members of the Quartet, explored folk music from Finland, Norway and Denmark. Sini gave a virtuoso demonstration of the Hardanger Fiddle, an 8-stringed version of the violin with different tuning and a flat bridge, yielding a characteristic resonance. Her fine solo performances alternated with ensemble playing of the Quartet who – despite tackling what was described as 'the gloomiest tune in Finland's 19th-century music' – produced attractive pieces demonstrating varying degrees of simplicity and complexity, illustrating the important folk influence on Scandinavian classical music.

The second part of the concert featured Jean Sibelius' only mature String Quartet. Although a Swedish-speaker from the west of the country, Sibelius became a key figure in the rise of Finnish nationalism and the drive for independence. He was strongly influenced by plangent modality of the Karelia folk scale. The full current Castalian Quartet approached the challenging task of this *Voces Intimae* Quartet, displaying both strength and delicacy. This is a taxing work both technically and emotionally, and the Quartet gave full range to both. At the emotional heart of the work is the third movement Adagio, to which they brought a chorale character reminiscent of Sibelius' Symphonies. The shock of the fourth movement Pesante removed any sense that this piece might be tending towards comfort, but the final Allegro ended the concert on the most positive note amid huge and sustained applause.

Saturday

Concert 5 Prize Winners Recital at 1130

Usha Kapoor and Edward Leung (violin and piano) delighted us with a concert in the beautiful Winchester College Music School, our lady mayor in attendance.

This talented duo won the first Birmingham International Piano Chamber Music Competition in 2018 and this long awaited concert was part of the prize. Young and international themselves, both are American citizens, Usha's mother is American, father Indian, and Edward's parents are from Hong Kong. With very similar musical backgrounds but from opposite sides of America they first met at a Music Festival in rural Poland in 2017! Here their similar approach drew them together, culminating in a Wigmore Hall recital last week (musician's Mecca!)

Their poised upright playing posture changed as the music intensified, when Usha almost danced and we were captured by her striking virtuosity. Edward bounced on the piano stool as his technical brilliance allowed him great freedom even in the most difficult passages. We were drawn deeply into their music making.

Brahms' Scherzo from the F-A-E sonata, a fiery movement with lyrical central trio section, captured us immediately, and was followed by 2 shorter pieces (Amy Beach and Lili Boulanger). The final Sonata in A minor by Amy Beach would be probably be far better known had she been a man. Impressively powerful and virtuoso, drawing on Austro-German and French Romanticism, it seemed the perfect choice for an American pair, much travelled in Europe. We will follow with interest the career of this talented duo.

Concert 6 Gala concert at 1945

The recently renovated St Paul's Church, superbly adapted for performances with excellent acoustics, had been the venue for most of the concerts, but it was relevant that the Gala evening should be held in the less spiritual environment of the Theatre Royal. Here the performers were dramatically suspended and spotlighted before us.

The evening commenced with the amazing first Brahms String Sextet. Some of us had experienced the rehearsal of this piece by the world famous Castalian Quartet on the previous day. It was fascinating and touching to see the mature members' personalities emerging and bringing into their 'family' two talented younger players so successfully in the superb actual performance.

For the second half. it was English composers starting with the Vaughan Williams' Oboe Concerto with the pure vocal sounds of Oliver Stankiewicz, the charming principal oboe of the LSO, and the strains of the strings of Winchester Camerata.

As a grand finale the Castalian Quartet returned as soloists with David Adams, leader of the Welsh National Opera Orchestra, directing from the orchestra in the divine Elgar's *Introduction and Allegro for Strings*. With such a combination the so called amateurs were stretched into a completely professional performance of these evocative sounds, as the army of twenty three standing violins and violas and seated cellists surged us forward from climax upon climax over the rolling Welsh hillside. This was surely Elgar as it should be played. It took my breath away.

Sunday

Masterclass at 1030 in Winchester College Music School

As always, the Winchester Chamber Music Festival reached out into the community, sharing expertise with groups of aspiring young musicians. The two groups in this masterclass were quite different, both in their choice of music and in their approach to it.

The Hampshire Quartet, members of the Hampshire Youth Orchestra, played the *Canzonetta* from Mendelssohn's 1st string quartet, Op.12. This is a more intimate and mysterious counterpart to the flamboyant first movement. The piece was played well but initially lacked a deeper understanding. The second group was more assertive in its playing of the first movement of the Dvořák American Quartet. They played with lots of energy and even anger, a movement which is both exuberant and lyrical with beautiful melodies.

And here comes Alice Neary in the role of the tutor who with her luminous personality imparted her knowledge and experience to both groups, teaching the first to be more assertive and the second more tender. In both cases, Alice eked out of the players more of an understanding of the music, through pertinent questions and listening to one another. Alice brilliantly helped them with aspects of style and technique through bowing, awareness of rhythm and dynamics. Both groups showed a marked improvement by the end of the session.

A very interesting and useful event for all present, this masterclass will help and encourage these musicians in their future development.

Concert 7 Family Concert at 1115 in The Nutshell The Magnificently Magical Musical Time Machine

Lenny Sayers, a professional clarinetist when not inventing time machines, enthralled an enthusiastic gathering of children and adults at the Nutshell. His time machine, switched on by a string quartet plus Olivier's oboe and voluminous audience participation, whizzed us across the centuries to hear contemporary music from Bach to Shostakovich and, finally, forward for a preview of the music of 2121! Reviews from the children were five star - 'perfect for ages 2-200', 'loved the way the musicians all entered into the fun', 'If it's an annual thing, we'll all come again'. Each piece was somebody's favourite, though the dialogue between Oliver and Lenny's twittering reeds brought the house down.

Concert 8 at 1630

In this year's flexible Festival it came as no surprise to the audience at the final concert to find a French oboe sonata where they were expecting a German piano trio. Poulenc's 1962 Oboe Sonata is dedicated to the memory of Sergei Prokofiev and it was given a memorable performance by Olivier Stankiewicz and Huw Watkins. The gentle opening led into the *Élégie* which often seemed to be looking back to an earlier generation of French composers – Ravel and Fauré were recalled in the long plangent phrases. The animated scherzo with the slower middle section was deftly played, and the final *Déploration* was very moving. Olivier was one of the hardest working members of the performance team, standing in whenever needed and bringing elegance and virtuosity to all his playing.

He was there again in the two Colin Matthews pieces. The Oboe Quartet No 2 and his arrangement of Schumann's *Mondnacht* were also a family affair with David Adams and Alice Neary side by side with their daughter, Isobel. The Oboe Quartet was a fascinating work with the strings scurrying in all directions while the oboe struggled patiently to bring them to order. The Schumann arrangement was a contrast: here the vocalisations of the oboe, were supported by delicate, almost Mahlerian writing for the strings.

And so to the Elgar Piano Quintet. Completed in 1918, it is the biggest (in all senses) of the three chamber works Elgar produced, and this performance, from the mysterious opening to its bold conclusion, gave us the full range of Elgar's vision. David Adams and Usha Kapoor moved the first movement forward while observing the *rubato* so necessary in this music, and all was underpinned by Huw Watkins' confident and authoritative piano. The heart of the work lies in the slow movement, where Charlotte Bonneton's wonderful viola-playing gave us a brief glimpse of this most complex composer's soul, and Alice Neary movingly showed us the work's kinship with the Cello Concerto, written at about the same time. We also heard ghostly pre-echoes of those 130 manuscript pages of the Symphony No 3, left unfinished at his death until completed by the late Anthony Payne in 1997. After a slow introduction the finale eventually builds to a triumphant ending, but as so often with Elgar, the victory is hard won along the way and the performers were at pains to remind us of the work's darker side. Yet, even as it spoke to us from 104 years ago of a time when Europe was still at war and when pestilence stalked the land, Elgar and our players concluded the work with an optimistic flourish.

There were many new features this year - the lively, interactive Family concert, the highly successful collaboration with local string orchestra, Winchester Camerata, the inclusion of a student musician-in-residence, and a chance to enjoy refreshments in the lovely St Paul's Church. Behind the scenes there were visits to schools, a Funky Lunch for Winchester GoLD and further community outreach events. This was an exciting Festival for audience, musicians and many more.

This review of the Festival is based on contributions from members of our Friends' scheme. Thank you to KB, BE, PH, RL, PM, TS, RT, HW, DW and RY