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Young Artist Recital 26 July 2009

Young Singers of Huge promise

WHAT a start we had! On Sunday, July 26, at Minehead Methodist Church we were privileged to hear three young singers of huge promise in a substantial and varied programme spanning three centuries of music at the Young Artists Recital.

Felicity Kerr, aged 17, mezzo-soprano, Kate Goodridge-Griffiths, aged 15, soprano, and Oliver Kelham, also 15, tenor - had all chosen items requiring a range of singing styles.

The Gluck and Handel arias present challenges even to professionals, yet they were performed with confidence and admirable stage presence by all three youngsters.

Four 20th century settings of Shakespeare songs followed, then two Schubert songs, some numbers from modern musicals and finally a delightful chunk of Gilbert and Sullivan's 'Pirates of Penzance'.

The shining beauty of Kate's soprano was quickly apparent in the Italian arias. Later she made Schubert's 'Ave Maria' sound fresh and new by her conviction and ability to communicate, qualities which came through also in the 'Phantom' extract, 'Think of me'.

In the 'Pirates of Penzance' finale, what fun she had - and so did we! The vocal fireworks in Mabel's aria highlighted her assurance and agility in the top register. (It is easy to imagine Kate having further fun as Rosina in 'The Barber of Seville'.)

Felicity's striking mezzo-soprano also brings opera to mind. The passion and dramatic power of her singing made Orpheus* famous lament for Eurydice genuinely moving.

Her control of light and shade, her brilliant coloratura (displayed notably in the aria from Handel's 'Semele') and her almost professional ease in the poignant West Side Story 'Somewhere' certainly conjure up visions of future stage possibilities. Remember this young lady's name!

A 15-year-old tenor? Oliver, sounding initially like a pleasant light baritone, soon began to show promises of riches to come upstairs. The tenor tones rang loud and clear in the modern items and his theatrical abilities were especially obvious in the piece from 'Les Miserables'.

His comic talents shone in the Gilbert and Sullivan and likewise in the folk song 'I'm Seventeen come Sunday'.

An evening of delight, well worth the price of a West End ticket - which you may have to pay one day to see one or more of this talented trio! MW

Orchestral Concert 27 and 28 July 2009

Exhilarating Start by Orchestra

BENJAMIN Britten's remarkable song cycle *Les Illuminations* was the splendid, challenging centre-piece of the opening orchestral concert, given in Dunster and Dulverton churches on July 27 and 28 by the accomplished orchestra, of the Minehead and Exmoor Music Festival.

Eight poems by the 19th century French poet Arthur Rimbaud provided rich and varied imagery for the 26-year-old Britten who, on the brink of World War Two, responded with music for strings and solo voice which brilliantly illustrates and amplifies the bizarre grotesqueries of the texts.

International soprano Rachel Nicholls, in her second Minehead Festival revealed a compelling grasp of the French texts.

She sang with persuasive attention to the shifting colours, moods and wit of the songs: everything from the imperious monomania of the thrice-declaimed *J'ai seul la clef de cette parade sauvage* to the dangerous lechery of *Antique*, the song addressed to the son on the God, Pan.

Her powerful dramatic voice was the perfect instrument for the dry acoustic of Dunster Church and was able, without strain, to partner a vigorous orchestra under the sympathetic baton of Richard Dickins.

Les Illuminations wisely programmed between two well-known and much-loved works. It was Grieg's *Holberg Suite* Op. 18 for strings which got the concert off to a comfortable and familiar start.

This suite of five dance movements is in the 17th century French style which flourished during the Norwegian playwright's (Holberg's) lifetime. It is full of singable tunes and attractive rhythms which manage to evoke not only the court of Louis XIV but an idealised Scandinavian rural culture as well.

There were exquisitely virtuosic solo passages in the final *Rigaudon* which contrasted well with the song without words preceding it. The French style was an apt link to the Britten which followed before the interval - after which the concert concluded with Mozart's youthful *Symphony No. 29 in A K201*, written when the composer was 18.

Its busy opening theme grabs the attention which the subsequently ingenious blend of simplicity and complexity retain to the end. Peace and order follow in the *Andante*, delicacy in the *Menuetto* and brilliant high spirits in the finale where oboe and horns add to the drive and turbulence of the music.

This was an authoritative and exhilarating start to the 46th year that we have been fortunate enough to have a festival of live orchestral music in the area. KJ

Chamber Concert 29 July 2009

Cherished feature of Festival Week

ON Wednesday afternoon in Minehead Methodist Church, Beethoven's sextet for clarinets, bassoons and horns and Weber's Adagio and Rondo respectively began and ended a delightful afternoon recital that has become a cherished feature of festival week.

The Beethoven, demanding athleticism in all parts, was an intriguing five-movement journey through shifting instrumental alliances, running scales and arpeggios, hunting calls and military rhythms.

The Weber, much shorter, was by turns ornately sonorous and comically gallop-like.

In between was a three-movement selection from the third of Mozart's six Divertimenti, written as background music, and played here on three clarinets, one of them a delicious bass.

The tonal variety achieved by all three recalled the timbres of trumpet calls, whispered flute and edgy oboe, and what remarkable pianissimos! All admirably set off by the warming acoustic of The Avenue Methodist Church.

An audience of 150 enjoyed one hour's comforting respite from the dismal weather and made a generous contribution to festival funds. KJ

Orchestral Concert 30 July 2009

Music of Festival Hall Quality

ON Thursday, July 30, there was a feast of music available in Minehead of such quality that the audience could almost forget that they were not in London's Festival Hall.

Once again the Festival Orchestra, under the baton of Richard Dickins, the dynamic artistic director and conductor for more than 20 years, gave us nearly three hours of musical joy.

An exuberant performance of Brahms' Academic Festival Overture set the ball rolling. This is a popular, celebrative concert item which Brahms himself called "a very boisterous potpourri of student drinking songs".

The triumphant finale using the most famous of student songs, 'Gaudeamus igitur', displays Brahms' mastery of counter-point and orchestral colour - and the large orchestra filling the stage of the Regal clearly enjoyed themselves as much as we did!

The major work which followed was dismissed by the 19th century critic Hanslick as proof that "music can exist which stinks to the ear"! Today it is one of the most loved concertos in the world - and here in Minehead we had a dazzling and

passionate performance of rare distinction by Gonzalo Acosta, the orchestra's leader.

Breathtaking beauty of tone and pyrotechnical mastery mesmerised us in the first movement. Fine woodwind playing in the opening of the slow middle movement nudged us into awareness of the orchestra's virtuosity too.

The finale raced towards its climax amid an ever more dizzying show of agility and speed from the soloist, who understandably looked physically drained as the applause erupted.

However, we had a final treat to come. For the final 55 minutes of Thursday's concert late night passers-by must have wondered as the Regal's walls shook with the sound of Shostakovich's mighty Tenth, a pivotal work in Soviet musical history.

Damned by Stalin, the composer wrote this shortly after the dictator's death. From the first mysterious strands of sound the music roared towards a massive climax of menacing power and then retreated.

Whatever Shostakovich had in mind, this superb orchestra conveyed the sense of a drama unfolding. The second, shorter movement was full of sound and fury, with scurrying strings, screaming woodwind, flaring brass and percussion, a savage portrait of a savage man - Stalin.

After the introspective third movement, haunting, melancholy and strangely disturbing, the finale began, cautiously at first, then picked up speed and courage. Here the earlier blackness was countered by an unexpected perkiness before the final affirmative statement. One young Russian called the symphony "an optimistic tragedy" and it was a sense of optimism that finally blazed through the last minutes of this monumental work.

All in all, an outstanding evening - as so many have been over the years. We are incredibly lucky in this corner of Somerset to have such an annual event on our doorstep, kept alive only by the hard work of so many volunteers - unpaid and insufficiently thanked. As with so many things in life, use it or lose it! M.W

Orchestral Concert 1 August 2009

Fitting Finale with Maestro Dickins

THE final concert of this year's festival, at The Regal Theatre, opened with the Prelude to Tristan and Isolde, Wagner departing from his German roots to write of Cornish legend.

The convoluted story - one of triangular love and death is mirrored in the Prelude. The opening four-note motif representing Tristan, is developed in structure and dynamics, drawing the listener into the passion of what is to follow in the opera. Wagner is not everyone's glass of hock but Richard Dickins swirling the wine in

this taster, energised the music from its gentle start, encouraging his players towards the passionate climax.

Sarah Thurlow, well-known to festival-goers for many years stepped from the orchestra to offer Weber's second clarinet concerto - a performance as beautiful as it was stunning.

Weber set out to demonstrate the qualities and range of the instrument and Sarah converted his composition superbly. From the opening three-octave leap into the precise clarity of the opening allegro; through a wonderful tenderness of tone in the lyrical second movement; and into the jerky eccentric polacca (polonaise) finale, she brought the whole thing off in dazzling and brillante fashion.

The orchestra responded to Richard's sympathetic direction, emphasising every nuance of the composer's wishes in full support of the soloist.

After Maestro Dickins' customary speech of appreciation to all who make for a successful festival, the enthusiastic audience was treated to Rachmaninov's Symphonic Dances. A late composition, the three-movement Dances are generally considered to reflect on [the] composer's life.

He quotes from his youthful first symphony and incorporates his fixation with the Dies Irae in the first and third movements, whilst the second movement is woven around the waltz with intricate wind and brass themes stuttering uncertainly over infectious string writing to realise the form of a danse-macabre.

Tightly squeezed on to The Regal stage, with harp and piano, and a battery of percussion requiring some choreography, the Festival Orchestra maintained excellent control under Richard's firm beat, of the various changes of style and tempo through which the composer imagined his life.

And, if the Minehead audience chose not to dance in the aisles, they surely left with the romantic rhythms of Rachmaninov ringing in their ears - ravishing!

So it was that artistic director and conductor Richard Dickins and his forces closed the 46th Minehead and Exmoor Festival season. Minehead has again been fortunate and privileged to have orchestral music-making of this quality brought into the heart of the area. RAG