

Arcadia Festival 2019

Based in historic churches amid the picturesque Welsh Marches, the annual Arcadia Festival has won a reputation for inventive programme-building and exciting music-making. Entitled 'Fête Anniversaire', the 2019 series of four concerts marked ten years of Arcadia with a welcome celebration of music by the festival's co-founder Eleanor Alberga. Also featured were several major works from the repertoire programmed with great success at previous Arcadia events in the last decade. Led by the festival's other co-founder, Thomas Bowes, the impressive resident Ensemble Arcadiana consisted of a group of internationally renowned musicians.

The Norman church of St Michael and All Angels, Kingsland with its fine medieval stained glass was the inspiring setting for the first concert on 3 October. After a spirited performance of J. S. Bach's Ricercar in six voices from *The Musical Offering*, the Ensemble gave a committed reading of Eleanor Alberga's String Quartet no.3 (2001). Often introspective and enigmatic, this richly scored four-movement work balanced serial elements with a strong tonal pull. Centred on the note 'D', the opening movement deftly exploited effects such as trills, tremolos, pizzicatos, glissandos and harmonics, all of which played a key part in developing the musical narrative. Every detail of the intricate counterpoint in the following Scherzo was carefully delineated by the players. They also relished the eloquent, airy lyricism of the hushed outer sections of the songlike *Adagio* third movement, which were imbued with an otherworldly radiance. The weighty finale brought together and further developed material from the previous movements. There was a cathartic charge to the driving, repeated-note rhythmic figures of this life-affirming closing *Allegro* that realised fully the music's rhythmic potential. Alberga's highly individual voice is arguably at its purest in her quartets and the Third is perhaps her most personal utterance in the genre. It was performed with energy and grace by violinist Thomas Bowes and Oscar Perks, violist Andras Kaljuste and cellist Jonathan Swensen, who seemed to catch this elusive score on the wing.

After the interval, Bowes, Perks and Swensen were joined by violist Clifton Harrison and cellist Hannah Sloane for Schubert's String Quintet in C D956, one of the great peaks of the chamber music repertoire. At first, their omission of the first movement's exposition repeat seemed disappointing, yet the players soon won me over to their decision by the sheer breadth and scale with which they unfolded the expository material, relaxing in to the elegant, euphonious second subject with disarming fluency. The poignant second movement was presented as a true *Adagio*, the musicians gradually unfurling its exquisite, halting main theme in a daringly spacious conception. Offering release, the stormy central episode was dispatched with a concentrated nervous intensity. Before the music slowly groped its way back uncertainly towards the reprise of the opening theme, the faltering chords at the movement's cavernous mid-point were genuinely forlorn and grief-laden. An energetic account of the quicksilver Scherzo was offset by a long-breathed approach to the hymn-like Trio section in which time seemed to stand still. It was wonderful to hear the players taking full advantage of the rewarding risks that live spontaneous music-making can offer and their bold and imaginative use of pregnant silences between the chorale-like phrases had listeners catching their breath. Equilibrium was restored in the convivial finale, which began at a satisfyingly measured pace but gathered considerable momentum before the players unleashed the impetuous conclusion at full tilt, pausing only in the final bar to deliver the climactic, dark-hearted *appoggiatura* as an authentically unsettling parting gesture. This was a brave, instinctive, probing and, above all,

humane realisation of Schubert's most profound utterance, setting the bar very high indeed for the rest of the festival's events.

The following evening's concert in St Mary Magdalene, Leintwardine did not disappoint. In Shostakovich's String Quartet no.7, the roguish humour of the opening movement was successfully conveyed and contrasted effectively with the icy awe of the succeeding *Lento*. A fugal outburst in the finale made its mark before the wistful, waltz-like episode reminded us of the personal nature of this score, dedicated to the composer's first wife Nina.

Clifton Harrison and Jonathan Swensen then joined Thomas Bowes, Oscar Perks, Andrew Kaljuste and Hannah Sloane for a performance of Schoenberg's string sextet *Verklärte Nacht*. Capturing the torrid, late-Romantic fervour of this piece, the players also ably conveyed its radical side as the febrile material was frequently extended, almost to breaking point. So rich and flexible were the sonorities produced by these resourceful six players that listeners were never left craving the larger forces of composer's later string orchestral arrangement.

After the interval, the distinguished oboist Nicholas Daniel took to the stage with Thomas Bowes, Oscar Perks, Andrew Kaljuste and Hannah Sloane in Eleanor Alberga's darkly atmospheric *Succubus Moon* (2007) for oboe and string quartet. One of the composer's most uncompromising statements, this troubled nocturne juxtaposed serene, lunar soundscapes with more sinister night-music. The music varied dramatically from spare, pared back textures to hard-driven, rhythmic passages and misty, dreamlike episodes. The oboe takes the lead throughout and Daniel brought the main protagonist to life, oozing malevolence in the queasily tone-bending opening section and coaxing the other players to join him with an agile fluency in the swifter segments. Near the end, a C major chord provided a glimmer of hope in this predominantly tenebrous score but the overwhelming impression left by this dedicated performance was one of mystery and dread.

The sombre mood continued with the closing item, Schubert's String Quartet no.14 in D minor, 'Death and the Maiden', D810. In this fresh and deeply considered account, the first movement's power and tension inexorably dissipated in the moving closing bars, all passion spent. The slow movement's variations gained in intensity as they progressed so that the powerful, driving central variant was not so much the climax of the movement as a catalyst for even greater spontaneity and diversity of articulation in the ensuing transformations of the famous tune. Neither the scherzo nor the tarantella finale felt unduly rushed and the resultant air around the notes allowed each of Schubert's themes to resonate fully. There was no lack of virtuosity, however, and the desperate, headlong dash concluding the last movement rounded off this insightful traversal of the score in darkly bravura style.

On the evening of 5 October, St Laurence Church, Ludlow was the imposing venue for a varied programme featuring a wide variety of musical forces. We began with a vivid, texturally clear rendition of Purcell's *Fantazia Upon One Note* initiated by the middle C from violist Clifton Harrison as he processed in from the back of the church to join his fellow musicians onstage.

Eleanor Alberga then gave the world premiere of her Sonata for Piano 'Seraph' (2019). The composer has already written several pieces for her own instrument, but this was her first piano sonata and it displayed all the expressive diversity and structural rigour associated with that genre. This big-boned, one-movement work often unfolded three contrapuntal lines simultaneously, the

writing and intention remaining clear and focussed. Characteristically powerful rhythmic episodes were contrasted with more inward-looking moments of reflection. Although the overall mood was free and improvisatory, the material was rigorously worked out from first bar to last. There were palpable signs of traditional sonata-form with a varied exposition and two recapitulations, the second distant and shadowy. Yet the liberating, extemporaneous quality of the writing, together with an ongoing evolution of all the ideas suggested something less rigid and more fantasia-like. It was this conflict between the formal and the instinctual that made Alberga's sonata so gripping and fresh. She has plans to extend the piece to three movements and, on the strength of this impressive premiere, that expanded version will be well worth hearing.

Oscar Perks, Andres Kaljuste, Hannah Sloane joined pianist Sophia Rahman and double-bassist Leon Bosch in a warm and supple account of Schubert's Quintet in A 'The Trout', D667, which closed the first half of the concert in relaxed good humour. With the first movement exposition repeat intact, this was a satisfyingly detailed view of a well-loved work, enlivened by some fast tempos and crisp articulation.

There was just one work after the interval – Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time* in which clarinettist Sacha Rattle joined Thomas Bowes, Eleanor Alberga and Jonathan Swensen. The performers all impressed with their natural, uninhibited approach to the music, not least in the extended clarinet, cello and violin solos, yet the other movements were by no means overshadowed in a reading that explored the full emotional gamut of this visionary score.

Music from four different centuries was represented in the final concert of the festival, which took place in St Giles Church, Downton-on-the-Rock. To begin, the delightful *Allegro* of Schubert's String Trio in B flat, D471 was played with charm and poise by Oscar Perks, Andres Kaljuste and Hannah Sloane. Next, Oscar Perks was joined by Thomas Bowes for a selection from Bartók's *44 Duos for Two Violins*. The skittish 'Teasing Song' was delivered with sufficient wit to elicit a delighted laugh from the audience, while 'Sorrow' had a quiet dignity, 'Mosquito Dance' buzzed with vitality and the concluding 'Ruthenian Kolomejka' exuded a raw, folk-like energy.

Horn player Richard Watkins teamed up with Thomas Bowes, Oscar Perks, Andres Kaljuste and Hannah Sloane for a performance of Eleanor Alberga's *Shining Gate of Morpheus* for horn and string quartet (2011). Originally written for the 2012 Arcadia festival, this lustrous and mercurial one-movement nocturne shows the brighter side of the composer's imagination, the antithesis of *Succubus Moon's* murky malevolence. A short introduction to the peaceful world of sleep scored for string quartet was followed by a horn-led fanfare heralding a sequence of strange dreams, in one of which the character of Puck, somewhat unexpectedly, appears. A lambent episode featuring muted horn was followed by a scherzo-like central section in which a hiccupping, percussive idea holds sway. Another episode was graced with eloquent solos for first violin and cello. This heartfelt and immediately attractive work ended in a tremulous, late-Romantic haze. Dreams follow their own logic and there was a delirious fluidity to Alberga's heady sequence of contrasting visions. The performers successfully conjured up the score's magical, half-lit aura and savoured its languid melodic lines.

After the interval came a second performance of Purcell's *Fantazia upon one Note*, followed by Shostakovich's String Quartet no.8, played by Thomas Bowes, Oscar Perks, Clifton Harrison and

Jonathan Swensen. This was an intense, thrillingly improvisatory account of one of the composer's most compact and personal scores.

Finishing the concert in upbeat mood, Thomas Bowes, Oscar Perks, Andres Kaljuste and Jonathan Swensen gave a buoyant performance of Eleanor Alberga's joyful String Quartet no.2 (1994). Tautly constructed, this concise, single-movement piece was based entirely on material heard at the very outset and featured traces of scherzo and slow movement within a carefully condensed sonata form. Fizzing with ideas and performed with both precision and impulse, it ended the entire festival on a magnificently euphoric note.

The 2019 Arcadia Festival was studded with musical highlights. So many much-loved stalwarts of the repertory emerged fresh and unhackneyed, their revolutionary and timeless properties brought home to the listener. Most importantly, the event served as a potent reminder of the range and depth of Eleanor Alberga's invariably engaging and directly communicative creative talent.

Paul Conway