

CARDUCCI QUARTET SERIES I 'Voyages from Budapest'

For the first of this Shropshire Music Season Series of concerts, the Carducci Quartet presented performances of Haydn's final quartet, Bartok's first and Brahms' Clarinet Quintet; Julian Bliss was the eloquent clarinettist in a fine performance that completed the concert. An illuminating talk on Bartok preceded the performance.

Haydn's Op 103, a fragment of two movements, was his final work in the genre, produced at a time of failing health. From the opening notes it was clear the Quartet were on sparkling form. The warmth of their sound, their cohesion and ability to play with total unanimity of purpose mark them out as one of the world's very finest groups. The changes in mood within this valedictory music were brought out superbly.

Bartok's First String Quartet is a radical departure from earlier composers' essays in the form. It is often sad yet the variety of tempi and emotions show endless invention. All four players impressed with their rich tone and rhythmic energy; Emma Denton's cello, the viola of Eoin Schmidt-Martin and the violins of Matthew Denton and Michelle Fleming all maintained the relentless intensity of this, the first of his six quartets.

When clarinettist Richard Muhlenfeld persuaded Brahms to come out of retirement and compose the Clarinet Trio and the Quintet, he did the world a huge favour! There are too few works for this wonderful combination of instruments and this is one of the greatest as Julian Bliss and the Carducci proved. Its moments of rhapsodic beauty occasionally make way for hints of the Hungarian influences in some of Brahms' earlier works but the Adagio gives the clarinettist scope for fine lyrical playing. The musicians gave every movement superb performances and the 'con moto' which ended the Quintet was as beautiful and mysterious as the work's opening. As the final notes died away there was a respectful hush before the applause started. It said everything. ---

Andrew Petch 18/3/18

RECORDER REVOLUTION!

Shropshire Music Trust concerts frequently produce surprises and Friday's performance in Shrewsbury's Lion Hotel by the Palisander Ensemble did just that. In a programme 'Recorder Revolution' spanning over 700 years of music for the not-so-humble recorder Lydia Gosnell, Miriam Nerval, Caoimhe de Paor and Elisabeth Flett played pieces by ancient greats such as Telemann and Vivaldi and more recent masters Vaughan Williams and Britten in arrangements for four recorders ranging from the 6 inches sopranissimo to the 6 foot contrabass.

Within the limitations of the recorder quartet there could not have been more variety of style and instrumentation. Many of the ancient works had been arranged by Miriam Nerval and while basically faithful to the renaissance and baroque styles they were given a very modern treatment. An outstanding example was Vivaldi's concerto 'La Notte' (interpreted as 'Nightmare') with ghostly shrieks and moans interspersed with technical brilliance.

Each piece was in itself a gem and the musicality was of the highest order. Toby Young's treatment of 3 studies by Purcell was certainly more young than old – did we hear a very good imitation of a jazzy slap bass from the contrabass recorder? Vaughan Williams 'Suite for Pipes' showed the composer's intimate knowledge of the recorder with a subtle sinuous liquidity in the melody while Britten's 'Swiss Clock' from his Alpine Suite had a realistic tick-tock throughout (but no cuckoo!)

Altogether this programme demonstrated just how much brilliant music has been written for recorders over the centuries even to the present day and Palisander have researched, composed and arranged works that portray this variety. As a whole performance their audience presentation though using fascinating material was less relaxed and easy than in their schools shows during the day, but this will come with experience.

It is to be hoped that members of the large audience left thinking of the recorder as so much more than the school experience of massed descants!

The next Trust concert is on Friday 16 February at 7,30 in Wem Town Hall with Moussa Dembele and Seneke Sillah – music of West Africa. No-one can accuse the Trust of not being adventurous!

Richard Duncan 10/2/18

'Quintets at Twilight' a Winter's Delight

There are some occasions when everything seems to come together to make the event truly memorable. The Shropshire Music Trust concert on Sunday in the historic Adam Ballroom at the Lion Hotel in Shrewsbury was just such an occasion when the performers, the programme, the venue and a packed attentive and appreciative audience combined to lift the spirits on a dark and chilly January evening. There was also one other important ingredient and that was the obvious enjoyment shown by the musicians; Ben Nabarro and Martin Cropper (violins), Robin Ireland and Sarah-Jane Bradley (violas), and Richard Jenkinson (cello).

The programme consisted of two giants of the string quintet medium; Mozart's String Quintet in G minor and the String Quintet in G major by Brahms. Between these two works came the underrated, and under-performed exquisite Phantasy Quintet by Vaughan Williams written in 1912. The composer devoted much of his life to the collection of folk songs and then proceeded to include many of these, in various guises, in his compositions. The Phantasy Quintet is no exception with echoes of folk-song particularly in the third movement.

Some of Mozart's greatest music was written in the minor key -and in G minor in particular are some of his most intimate. With an overriding sense of the paradoxical beauty of sadness and a poignantly beautiful slow movement, the final Allegro eventually however brings a joyous major key and the rediscovery of the possibility of happiness.

It is difficult to believe that Brahms intended his G major quintet, composed mainly in 1882, to be his last composition such is the sheer exuberance of the piece. In particular the last movement features the Hungarian gypsy style of which the composer was so fond. This was a wonderful way to end an exceptional concert

**Frank North
15/01/18**

EX CATHEDRA 'CHRISTMAS BY CANDLELIGHT' 1.12.17

The strains of a 16th century German composer sung by a solo voice, an almost monastic sound, accompanied the entrance of Ex Cathedra into St. Chad's Church. This, their annual programme "Christmas by Candlelight" is the most eagerly awaited event in Shropshire Music Trust's enterprising series of concerts.

The programme changes subtly from year to year -but the quality of performance never varies. "Ding Dong Merrily on High" was given as exuberant a performance as you could imagine. There were much-loved, familiar works, music by Benjamin Britten and James MacMillan as well as Irish traditional music, compositions from the pens of Monteverdi, Rachmaninoff and John Tavener.

The accuracy, vitality and sheer enjoyment in their music making are the hallmarks of a superb choir. "Minuit Chretiens", better known by most of us as 'Oh, Holy Night', by Adolphe Adam was a fine example of a familiar work in a new arrangement which delighted the audience. A new ingredient was the 'other worldly' use of tuned glasses, but perhaps the most spine chilling moments came with the opening of the second half of the concert. The musicians made the utmost use of the space and acoustics of St. Chad's, creating a wonderful antiphonal effect. The church resounded and the impact of a solo soprano over a subtle wordless chorus was indescribable -indeed, the sopranos were on magnificent form, as was every section of the choir.

As usual, there was a well-chosen selection of readings but sadly a PA glitch meant not all were audible in the left gallery in the first half. There was no such problem with the final choral work, "How shall I fitly meet thee". This masterpiece by JS Bach, the greatest of all composers, was a moment of spiritual beauty for which no words are adequate.

This was an evening of sublime music and words; a perfect start to the Christmas season.

Andrew Petch 2/12/17

DELIGHTFUL LUNCHTIME OF WELSH FIDDLE & HARP MUSIC

For its latest concert this season, Shropshire Music Trust hosted a musical duo from Swansea who have family in Shrewsbury. Delyth (who was born in Oswestry) and her daughter Anghared – otherwise known as DnA – delighted a full house at the Lion Hotel on a dull Monday lunchtime. These two exemplified the very best of Welsh music – taking inspiration from the songs of ancient times, chapel hymn books and the wonderful landscapes of Wales.

Anghared, is a classically trained violinist who now excels at arranging and playing music from her homeland – accompanied by Delyth on the Welsh Harp. Delyth has a long performing career and the duo are now working on a second album of their music.

We heard a wide range of tunes including Anghared's own work in particular – Brandy Cove - (close to her home village) in which she introduced us to sounds of the waves which book-ended the piece. Lovely, also to hear her perform on a specially made 'Octave' violin. This brought a rich, cello-like sound which fitted the yearning and longing in the music so well.

Delyth's harp playing perfectly complimented the violin and brought another dimension to a poem written by her father, the poet Nigel Jenkins and read by Anghared – again bringing out the pair's love of their culture and the Welsh language. A new percussive twist to the sound of the harp was produced by the addition of a slip of paper – apparently first produced using a ten-shilling note!

The concert ended with a lively and imaginative arrangement of Sospan Fach – better known to some of the audience from the Rugby field! A brilliant start to the week! shared also by pupils at Church Stretton Primary School and Coton Hill Carehome who benefitted from a visit by the duo whilst they were in the area.

Shropshire Music Trust's next concert is on 1st December when Ex Cathedra will be performing Christmas Music by Candlelight.

Jenny Petch 22.11.17

THE AVISON ENSEMBLE @THE LION HOTEL, 12TH NOV 2017

The Avison Ensemble is a group of distinguished chamber musicians devoted to 18th century music which they perform on period instruments. They take their name from Charles Avison, described as the most important English composer of the 18th century.

Their programme at the Lion Hotel was called “Italian Connections”, for Avison was taught by Francesco Geminiani who in turn had been a pupil of Arcangelo Corelli. The Italian musicians profoundly influenced English composers, though Purcell and Locke, both represented in this concert, predated the Italian influence.

The group consisted of violinists Pavlo Besnosiuk and Caroline Balding, Roger Hamilton on harpsichord and Richard Tunnicliffe on bass viol and cello. As the 18th and 19th centuries progressed, the music became more sophisticated -and more rewarding to listen to, though perhaps not so in the case of Francesco Maria Veracini. He, like Handel and Geminiani, was born within a few years of JS Bach though only Handel’s writing stands comparison with Bach’s.

The quality of individual and ensemble playing was impeccable and the pieces were charmingly introduced by Pavlo Besnosiuk. All were short, intense works; the Adagio from Purcell’s Sonata in D minor was an opportunity for the players to show how the parts interact with great delicacy.

The high point of the event was Handel’s Trio Sonata in G, Op5 No4. This showed Handel at his most creative and his capacity for musical recycling as all the movements came from pre-existing Handel compositions! Yet the result was a work of tremendous vitality, great rhythms and much writing was obviously originally for the human voice. The performance brought out every facet of the music; superb interaction between the players, ideal tempi and rhythmic energy.

Yet another fine concert organised by Shropshire Music Trust. This is proving to be one of their very finest seasons.

Andrew Petch

13/11/17

ALEC DANKWOTH QUARTET @ THE LION HOTEL, 5TH NOV 2017

For their gig at the Lion Hotel, the Alec Dankworth Quartet started as a trio! Entitled “World Spirit”, the programme ranged from Ireland to Venezuela to America and South Africa as well as Hungary. Vocalist Emily Dankworth, accompanied by bass guitarist Alec Dankworth and percussionist Asaf Sirkis sang the Irish traditional “Black is the colour”; it was exquisite, establishing immediately the fine musician ship which was the hallmark of the evening.

Three became four and emphasised the world spirit when saxophonist Brandon Allen arrived -he had valiantly left Spain that morning to get to Shrewsbury! His playing on tenor and soprano saxes brought a huge energy to the proceedings; their version of Handy’s “St Louis Blues” was a show stopper!

This was an evening of chamber jazz at its very finest; the interplay between musicians and singer were fantastic. Emily sometimes dueted with each player and, with Brandon’s sax, seemed like another instrument. “Red Top” gave Brandon the vehicle to improvise a solo worthy of the great bands led by its composer Lionel Hampton in the 50’s

Ellington and Charlie Parker each provided a composition but the surprise of the evening was a solo by Asaf Sirkis performing an example of South Indian music -but the percussion instrument was his voice! Asaf can only be described as a rhythm machine with a soul! Whether soloing or providing a driving beat, he, like his colleagues, was a perfect ensemble musician.

Leader Alec Dankworth’s bass guitar was in turn a lyrical solo voice as well as a compelling, driving rhythmic force. The final programmed number was a South African medley arranged by Abdullah Ibrahim. This started with a suggestion of the great anthem for African freedom. Sublime!

This wonderful evening’s music was part of Shropshire Music Trust’s adventurous programming; the capacity audience loved it.

Andrew Petch

6.11.17

THE COFFEE OPERA HITS TOWN

Wastepaper Opera Company gave an exciting performance of 'local lad' James Oldham's 'Coffee Opera' at the Wightman Theatre on Sunday 22nd October as part of this year's Shropshire Music Season.

Based on JS Bach's secular Coffee Cantata written for his friends in a Leipzig coffeehouse, this performance involved coffee and cake with the audience round tables as the 'customers'.

The imaginative reworking was based around vivacious Lizzie who loves coffee but whose killjoy father is dead set against his daughter having any kind of caffeinated fun ...

Wastepaper aim to challenge the preconceptions of what opera is, and the show exposed the clichés of both opera and the artisan coffee shop with references to consumerism, capitalism, the coffee scene, and snobbery.

James Oldham, the composer and director of the show, said "It was great to bring my work here for the first time in my professional life, since leaving the area to go to music college".

James went to the Shrewsbury 6th Form College and the librettist for the show, Michael Wood, also has local connections as an old boy of Shrewsbury School.

Kate Williams 23.10.17

ZOE BEYERS@ CHURCH STRETTON METHODIST CHURCH, 13-10-2017

Church Stretton Methodist Church was an ideal setting for a recital of music by JS Bach for solo violin. It offered a fine, warm acoustic with an elegant simplicity which offered no visual distraction. Violinist Zoe Beyers suggested that her capacity audience immersed themselves in the music whilst paying no attention to their surroundings. What excellent advice! Bach's music does not owe its existence to any visual or narrative stimulus - it transcends language and rationality.

Zoe Beyers is a musician deeply committed to a two-fold mission; to explore this miraculous music, never resting in her quest for the perfect performance and to bring her performances to the widest possible audience. For many scholars the sonatas and partitas for solo violin are the pinnacle of Bach's achievements and the greatest works ever written for four strings. How one instrument creates such a volume and variety of sound is an understandable response to this mystery.

This music demands energy, accuracy, total tonal control and, above all, a relentless rhythmic vitality at every tempo. Ms. Beyers brought us performances which met all these criteria, from the opening of the Adagio of the First Sonata to the concluding Chaconne of the Second Partita. This Chaconne is simply miraculous; the Partita opens with an Allemande which does not call for any double-stopping yet ends with the Chaconne (which is longer than all the preceding four movements combined) calling for the maximum virtuosity from the artist. It's worth commenting that many Jazz musicians recognise that the improvisatory nature of Bach's music has profoundly influenced their own work.

Beecham famously said: "For a fine performance only two things are absolutely necessary: the maximum of virility coupled with the maximum of delicacy". This wonderful recital had both these qualities in abundance. A wonderful first concert for the start of Shropshire Music Trust's new season.

Andrew Petch

15/10/17