

Maybe this will be part of a learning curve for next year. As a first festival this has been immensely impressive and plans are already in hand for next year. Jane Gordon has to be thanked and congratulated – starting anything for scratch is difficult and getting this far so quickly shows a level of professionalism and stamina which should take her far.

Brian Hick

Arcadia Festival 2017

Now seven years old, the Herefordshire-based Arcadia Festival has forged a reputation for first-rate musicianship and enterprising programme-building. The 2017 event had a Gallic theme, reflected in the inaugural concert given on October 6 in the parish church of St Mary Magdalene, Leintwardine.

The first item, Debussy's *Syrinx* for solo flute was performed off-stage, a deft acknowledgement of the work's theatrical roots as incidental music for Gabriel Mournay's uncompleted play *Psyché*, where it was intended to sound from the wings while Pan died onstage. A fluent, deeply-felt reading by Diego Aceña Moreno led seamlessly into Saint-Saëns's *Fantasie* for violin and harp in A, op.124. This nostalgic piece from the later period of the composer's life was sensitively realised by violinist Thomas Bowes and harpist Hugh Webb who responded to the often gossamer textures with playing of the utmost delicacy. The harp produced veiled, sometimes guitar-like sonorities that offered glimpses into a world of memories and regrets. Both musicians savoured their intricately woven lines and caught the score's elusive, subtle character with precision and imagination.

There followed a rare opportunity to hear Beethoven's *Serenade in D* for flute, violin and viola, op.25. Once again the performance began with a historically informed gesture, honouring the origin of the piece as outdoor music: the players processed to the front like three nocturnal troubadours during the opening bars of the march-like 'Entrata Allegro' first movement. This charming tribute to the eighteenth-century divertimento tradition finds the composer at his most convivial and his genial discourse was elegantly traversed by Diego Aceña Moreno (flute), Jacqueline Shave (violin) and Andres Kaljuste (viola). Their presentation of the

central set of variations was especially felicitous, investing each variant with its own personality and colour.

After the interval, cellist Jonathan Swensen joined the ensemble for more repertoire seldom encountered in concert: Albert Roussel's *Sérenade* for flute, violin, viola, cello and harp, op.30 (1925). Piquantly melodic, this finely crafted piece was well served in a performance which married technical bravura and interpretative insight. The enigmatic central *Andante* made a perfect foil for the vigorous outer movements and the whole score unfolded with a delightful sense of adventure deserving of the warm reception it received from a capacity audience.

A last-minute alteration in the schedule meant that, in place of the advertised Debussy String Quartet, the concert closed with a dazzling rendition of Eleanor Alberga's String Quartet no.1 of 1993. Inspired by a lecture on physics and space, this substantial three-movement work is a compelling mixture of fizzing energy and fathomless stasis, forged miraculously into a cogent entity. The spiky opening movement's marking of *Détaché et martellato e sehr lebhaft and swing it man* gives a flavour of its audaciously eclectic spirit. It made a strong impression with its rhythmic variety and rich counterpoint. Spaciously conceived, the nocturne-like middle movement is, in the words of the composer, 'a vision of matter colliding, separating and massing in space'. The sense of scale and weightlessness suggested by this description was amply conveyed by the players' airy, hypnotic and superbly controlled account. A decidedly earthy finale rounded off the work in a joyous celebration of the dance. With its uncompromising dissonances and metrical complexity, Alberga's dynamic quartet poses many challenges. In response, Thomas Bowes, Jacqueline Shave, Andres Kaljuste and Jonathan Swensen put their considerable collective artistry entirely at the service of this punchy, exacting and thrillingly individual score.

This opening recital of the 2017 Arcadia Festival was typically ambitious. Its adventurous selection of pieces was rewarded by consummate and fresh-sounding performances. The 2018 series of concerts set in the beautiful Welsh-Shropshire border country should on no account be missed.

Paul Conway