

It's never a good sign when you're given earplugs at a classical concert. Thankfully, though, East Neuk festival organisers were probably being a little over-cautious for Friday evening's performance from clarinetist Julian Bliss and Edinburgh-born guitarist Sean Shibe (☆☆☆☆), both resident artists at this year's event.

The offending work was LAD by US composer Julia Wolfe, originally for nine bagpipers and getting its UK premiere in a new version by Shibe for multitracked electric guitars. It was certainly loud – not least in Shibe's towering textures of mournful, slowly rising harmonies, which made their mark almost physically in the intimate space of Anstruther's Dreele Halls. But it was the work's uncompromising monumentality that made it really memorable.

And LAD formed the arresting centrepiece in what was a long and perhaps unavoidably bitty concert, with both Bliss and Shibe bringing out bewilderingly eclectic repertoire – although Steve Reich's New York Counterpoint and Electric Counterpoint, in which both musicians both played against rippling ensembles of their pre-recorded selves, brought welcome focus in lithe, athletic, gently caressing accounts.

And earplugs were perhaps turning into a festival theme. There were more on offer for De Profundis (☆☆☆☆), the latest in East Neuk's tradition of big new site-specific works, devised by trumpeter and former Royal Conservatoire of Scotland head John Wallace and involving more than 60 local and professional brass players. It was a captivating, highly moving experience, at once a celebration of and a memorial to Fife's mining traditions, and of the brass bands so intimately entwined with them, with players scattered around a darkened, mist-filled interior of the Bowhouse converted barn near St Monans.

Wallace's music, devised with the players, ranged from achingly beautiful polyphony inspired by Gaelic psalm singing to aggressive and intentionally disorientating passages, with commentary from actor Maureen Beattie charting the challenges and dangers of pit life. By De Profundis's close, the miners' permanent return to the surface felt like a longed-for release from a hellish existence but



↑ Trumpeter and former Royal Conservatoire of Scotland head John Wallace devised De Profundis involving 60 brass players.

also the end of a cherished way of life, to the warbling of a blackbird. Simply a unique, unforgettable experience.

There were fewer earplugs across the rest of East Neuk's classical programme, but plenty of Schubert – and some big-name international performers in residence to play his music. The very fine Belcea Quartet, for example, gave a remarkably raw, dramatic account of his gargantuan D887 String Quartet (☆☆☆☆) – quite a lot to deal with at 11.30 on a Saturday morning. In the Belcea's hands, the first movement felt like the collision of irreconcilable opposites, the players staring starkly at Schubert's uncompromising visions, and turmoil was never far away from the deceptively easy-going surface in a febrile, nervy finale. It was a revelatory performance, as though questioning and unearthing entirely new perspectives on familiar music.

Equally revelatory was the playing of legendary Russian pianist Elisabeth Leonskaja in Saturday evening's concert (☆☆☆☆), who delivered remarkable strength in a gutsy account of Schubert's lesser-known Piano Sonata D537. She played with such power that at times she lifted herself bodily off her stool, but there was a remarkable range of colours, too, as she mined every phrase for meaning, looking beyond simple sonic beauty – though there was plenty of that – for

perspectives that were at once earthy and visionary.

Leonskaja was joined by the Belceas – or at least three of the quartet, plus double bassist Alois Posch – for Schubert's Trout Quintet to close the day.

Sunday afternoon brought In the Footsteps of Thomas Kingo (☆☆☆☆), a concert of 'friendship across the North Sea', as Robert McFall, leader of Mr McFall's Chamber, memorably described it. Following folk-inspired improvisations from Norwegian Hardanger fiddler Nils Okland and bassist Mats Eilertsen, as bracing as a glass of icy spring water, came another brand new piece. Chrysillis, an East Neuk Festival co-commission from Norwegian composer Henning Sommerro, draws on the traditional musics of Scotland, Denmark and Norway, linked together by the Fife origins of Thomas Kingo, one of Denmark's most respected early composers, whose music grew to be known throughout Scandinavia.

Sommerro had set his bold, immediately likeable piece as a travelogue through the three countries, combining the playing of Fair Isle fiddler Chris Stout, Dundee-born harpist Catriona McKay and Mr McFall's quintet to beguiling, foot-tapping effect.

DAVID KETTLE

● BBC Radio 3 broadcasts performances from this year's East Neuk Festival throughout its schedules this week and next week.