

Lammermuir celebrates a decade of balancing risks and rewards



David Kettle

Much has been achieved by East Lothian's Lammermuir Festival, which celebrates its tenth anniversary this year with a programme that feels even more ambitious and rewarding than ever, and according to James Waters, the event's co-artistic director alongside Hugh Macdonald, the key to its success is trust.

"It's about people believing that if something's in the Lammermuir Festival, it will be of a standard that they should give it a shot," he explains, and points to a specific memory from a few years back. "At a concert by Trio Mediaeval, I heard someone commenting to a friend that this wasn't the kind of thing they'd usually come to. The other person replied: no, but if the Lammermuir Festival puts it on, I'm going to trust it."

The same goes for artists, Waters explains. "There are people phoning us now who we wouldn't have dared phone seven or eight years ago – we just didn't want to get laughed at."

The Lammermuir Festival has achieved great things in its decade of existence – winning the Royal Philharmonic Society's prestigious festival award in 2017 is perhaps the most overt example of that. But it's had quieter successes, too: discovering new East Lothian venues (there are a couple of new ones in this year's festival), for example, or nurturing emerging musicians – among whom Edinburgh-born guitarist Sean Shibe and the Glasgow-based Maxwell Quartet return this year as established and celebrated artists.

"One thing that's really gratifying, though," Waters continues, "is that we can programme a 30-minute symphony by a contemporary Scottish composer. You could easily scare an audience off with something like that, but it's selling really well." He's referring to Stuart MacRae's *Prometheus Symphony*, getting its world-premiere performance on 19 September from the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, and marking



James Waters and Hugh Macdonald, right, of the Lammermuir Festival

the final instalment in MacRae's three-year residency with the festival. It promises to be one of this year's highlights.

Lammermuir has firmly established itself in the British musical calendar (about ten per cent of audiences now come from outside Scotland, Waters explains). And its canny timing – in between Edinburgh's festival madness and the start of the orchestras' main seasons – has only helped its success, with some East Lothian residents (whisper it) even suggesting they wait for

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Lammermuir rather than braving the crowds in the Festival City.

And with the calibre of performers that Waters and MacDonald attract, you can see why. This year baritone Roderick Williams sings all three of Schubert's great song cycles in English translations by Jeremy Sams ("they're all in small churches, and Roderick said he might do some prowling around the audience – he's desperate to break down barriers," adds Waters), and there are return visits from the eminent Mosaïques Quartet, festival patron Steven Osborne and Scottish Opera ("which we can't believe our luck about"). The Dunedin Consort journeys through

Bach's Brandenburg Concertos and Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* across four concerts, and there are even the wheezing, whirring contraptions of Kathy Hinde and Maja SK Ratkje's bewitching *Aeolian* – part performance, part kinetic-sculptural piece – which simply has to be seen and heard to be believed.

To what extent does Waters feel he and Macdonald are indulging their own passions in the event? "Well, if you don't really care about something you don't do it," he chuckles. "After all, you've got to go and listen to all this stuff, so you might as well put on something you actually want to hear." And what about the future? There are plans in place, certainly, but no radical shake-ups from what's made Lammermuir so successful.

"We'd like to continue commissioning new pieces, and keep pushing the level of artists too," says Waters. "The challenge is to keep the balance of flavours right – it's about finding stuff that makes the festival really distinctive and special, and hopefully unlike anywhere else."

Waters is also keen that the festival shouldn't simply play safe. "The old truism is that the riskiest thing is not to take any risks at all. Festivals have no reason to exist. But we're delighted that people will come to Lammermuir, hopefully because it's interesting, and possibly because we sort of know what we're doing." ■

The 2019 Lammermuir Festival runs from 13 to 22 September, www.lammermuirfestival.co.uk