

A bracing launchpad for a week of music

MUSIC

Lammermuir Festival

The sensuous harmonies of Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* Prelude felt like great waves of sound surging to fill the cavernous interior of St Mary's Church, Haddington, then breaking over the capacity audience.

It was an appropriately imposing opening to this year's Lammermuir Festival, as grand, generous and confident as the ten-day East Lothian event itself feels, having recently won the Royal Philharmonic Society's 2017 festival award in just its eighth outing.

It was an unhurried, thrillingly immediate Wagner performance from the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra (★★★★) under Martyn Brabbins on Friday evening, all caressing melodies and lovingly sculpted textures that made full use of the church's resonant acoustic.

That acoustic provided a clear backdrop, too, for Brabbins's brisk, good-natured Mahler Fourth Symphony – strings dug into their lines (basses were particularly rich); woodwind were vivid; brass glowed.

Brabbins balanced unselfconscious simplicity in the Symphony's slow movement with a pleasingly sinister edge to a fractured, devilish

scherzo, with leader Laura Samuel on oily form in her lopsided violin solos.

Young soprano Rowan Pierce added wide-eyed, youthful authenticity to the child's view of heaven in the Symphony's concluding song with her pure, graceful voice. She was occasionally rather submerged in the orchestra's textures, however – something that had also been an issue in her three Mozart arias earlier in the programme.

It felt like a pilgrimage on Saturday afternoon to travel to far-flung Humber Kirk, a miniature 19th-century edifice nestled in its own secluded valley, for Bach's Goldberg Variations from scholar, Dundee Consort director and (in this case) harpsichordist John Butt (★★★★).

He's known for the flamboyance and flair of his playing, but this performance at times sounded perplexingly idiosyncratic. There was a beautifully improvisatory freedom to his opening Aria, but elsewhere rhythms were stretched beyond consistency and he flicked furiously through the pages of his score, as though in a rush to get to the end.

He played with fearless focus and eloquent ornamentation, however, and it was nothing if not thought-provoking – and just as stimulating as Butt's fascinating introduction, in which he expounded on what he

called Bach's 'spiral time', blending linear and cyclical notions of time.

Saturday's evening concert took place in the warm, elegant interior of Dirleton Kirk, with an equally warm, elegant account of Schubert's Octet from the Hebrides Ensemble (★★★★).

The Kirk's generous acoustic no doubt aided the group's astonishingly rich, velvety sound – with glowing contributions from bassist Enno Senft and Stephen Stirling on horn – but it was a performance full of vivid character, too, not least in its sharply etched theme and variations movement.

The evening's discovery, however, was the opening Rhapsodic Quintet (a clarinet quintet in all but name) by Herbert Howells, written in 1919, sounding like Debussy meeting Vaughan Williams, and given an astonishingly full-blooded, vigorous account by the Hebrides players. Clarinetist Lynsey Marsh's lyrical lines were very much embedded in the almost orchestral richness of Howells's textures, but she shone through nonetheless in what was a captivating, compelling performance. It was an arresting, sometimes provocative start to this year's Lammermuir events, and a bracing launchpad for the coming week's music.

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