

MUSIC

SCO, Joseph Swensen & Jane Atkins

Queen's Hall, Edinburgh



RIGHT from its gruff, muscular, violist-against-the-world opening, Edinburgh composer John McLeod's brand new viola concerto *Nordic Fire* – given a fiercely committed, galvanising premiere by dedicatee Jane Atkins and the Scottish Chamber Orchestra under Joseph Swensen – grabbed the ear and the mind, and never let go.

It was a remarkable performance of an equally remarkable work: though inspired by the Northern Lights, if you'd been expecting fragile, ethereal delicacy, you'd have been shocked. There was plenty of acid, iridescent colour – not least from timpanist Alasdair Kelly pummelling the frames rather than the skins of his drums, as well as slaps and taps delivered to strings and horns alike. But McLeod seemed to focus more on the fire of his title, in gutsy, volatile writing for Atkins, and restless, surging music in the orchestra that seemed ready to catch flame any moment. There was just enough rep-

black bin-bag material trailing from a dark sky.

In a Macbeth full of powerful visual references to recent civil wars, Macbeth and his warriors appear in modern battle fatigues, with stab vests and camouflage jackets; and his lady, waiting for him at home in a concrete bunker, in jeans and t-shirt, with a knife in her back pocket, against the dangers of a world where there is never any freedom from the

etition – from a fierce, three-note call to attention through to plangent fragments of the *Dies irae* plainchant – for the work's grand arch structure to be immediately discernable, and it found an expert (and seldom achieved) balance between uncompromising angularity and wonderfully accessible immediacy. Atkins herself seemed electrified with energy after her fearfully focused performance, and so too was the audience, judging by the rapturous reception the work received.

It's testament to Atkins' commitment, too, that she was in her more usual seat as the SCO's principal viola for the concert's two remaining works. Swensen began with a bright, propulsive account of Grieg's *Holberg Suite*, though

which compresses the whole evening – including an interval – into less than two and a half hours, and fully exploits the riveting intensity of the story of Macbeth's rise and fall.

Its main weakness, on the other hand, lies in its failure to make its central concept work in the detail of the leading performances, and in harmony with Shakespeare's breathtakingly intense and lurid poetry. Michael Nardone's Mac-

his workmanlike string orchestra arrangement of Beethoven's Op. 131 Quartet rather dissipated the work's uncanny focus and intensity.

DAVID KETTLE

MUSIC

Jack White

Usher Hall, Edinburgh



THERE are no half measures with Jack White, who exercised his performer's prerogative to ensure that his audience were fully in the moment with him and his band. No more polite requests that fans desist from filming the show on their phones – all devices were secured inside a foam cover which could only be unsealed on exiting the venue.