

SCO & Karen Cargill

Usher Hall, Edinburgh

★★★★

IT'S NOT often you get to hear music by two Mahlers in a single concert – more's the pity, judging by the exquisite songs by Alma Mahler that preceded her husband Gustav's Fourth Symphony in this enterprising evening from the Scottish Chamber Orchestra.

They were simply exquisite – well, the penultimate song, "In my father's garden," might have overstayed its welcome somewhat, but the rest were restless, churning creations, thrillingly alive to the poetry they set, full of overheated emotion and unexpected harmonic twists.

These were just the works to show what a major musical figure Alma might have become, had she not effectively renounced composition to support the various men in her life, as her biographer Cate Haste explained in her illuminating pre-concert discussion. They had an ideal interpreter, too, in Karen Cargill, who stayed true to their somewhat wide-eyed innocence (Alma wrote them all between the ages of 18 and 21) while using her thrillingly versatile voice

album featured 20 musicians from across Scotland's indie and folk fraternities.

Arguably, the modest and lugubrious Mr Cutler would mutter about the fuss, yet he was still there in spirit and speech, welcoming the audience to the fictional island of Y'Hup round which the first half of the show was built, where the clatter of cowbells heralded tales of strange fauna such as Instance the Yam and

to range from operatic declamation to sometimes barely more than a whisper.

Advertised conductor Mark Wigglesworth was indisposed for the evening, but young US conductor Kensho Watanabe gamely stepped in with direction that was focused and controlled yet bursting with energy, teeming with detail yet never micromanaged. His Mahler Fourth sounded – unsurprisingly – gloriously nimble and buoyant under a chamber orchestra, and his characterisations were masterful, especially in the raw, devilish scherzo, high on grotesquerie. It was a shame, though, that Cargill sounded so distant on her return in the Symphony's last movement, singing from behind the orchestra.

DAVID KETTLE