

Wow moments to treasure in Orkney



David Kettle

To make people say “wow” – that’s one of festival director Alasdair Nicolson’s key aims, he explained in his St Magnus International Festival launch speech. He meant audiences and performers alike – and in response both to the festival and to the many delights of Orkney itself – and there was certainly plenty to inspire, provoke and captivate in the opening days of his 2018 event.

One of the first wows, however, concerned the Orcadian weather – notoriously unpredictable at the best of times – after relentless high winds forced the cancellation of Saturday’s outdoor festival-within-a-festival featuring three bands at Skaill House. In the cosy, rosy interior of Kirkwall’s St Magnus Cathedral, however, the festival’s opening concert the previous evening provided much to enthral, and indeed to illuminate.

Nineteen-voice Sonoro, founded just a couple of years ago by conductor Neil Ferris, gave a magnificent account of Rachmaninov’s *Vespers* (★★★★), the choir’s modest chamber forces bringing a compelling transparency and luminosity to what can often be an all-consuming wall of sound in the hands of bigger forces, while losing none of the music’s richness and colour. St Magnus’s interior provided a beautifully warm, supportive acoustic, even if the sound felt slightly balanced towards the women’s voices – most noticeably when Rachmaninov sent his basses descending into their profoundest depths. But there was a persuasive sense of movement to Ferris’s account, each phrase charged with direction and intention, so that although it was tempting simply to wallow in Sonoro’s exquisite sound, Ferris constantly reminded us that this was a work of drama, emotion and deep spirituality. A magnificent achievement.

Equally magnificent, in its own way, was Saturday evening’s opera offering, from Denmark’s Aarhus Sommeropera under Scottish-born conductor David Riddell.



Photograph: Rachael Betty

The St Magnus Festival Chorus in rehearsals

Their account of Telemann’s comic *Pimpinone* (★★★★) was a real hoot, yet they found remarkably touching pathos amid the work’s somewhat frivolous story of a servant woman getting the better of her gullable master, in an amusingly cartoonish, contemporary staging by Ivar Gjørup. Christopher Cowell’s sharply colloquial and very 21st-century English translation brought more than a few titters, and Berit Berfred Jensen made an engagingly sly, coquettish maid Vespetta, singing with brilliant clarity. The real stars of the evening, however, were the players of the Danish Sinfonietta, brisk, clipped and propulsive under Riddell’s precise direction, and with violinist Mo Yi an able soloist in the movements of Telemann’s D major Violin Concerto interspersed between the opera’s scenes.

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The biggest wow, however, came on Sunday evening, in a joyful, roof-raising performance of Rossini’s jolly *Petite messe solennelle* (★★★★★) from the St Magnus Festival Chorus, bolstered by singers from Sonoro, back in St Magnus Cathedral. Orkney’s weather made a fitting counterpoint here, as the radiant colours drawn by Ferris from his singers – not to mention Paul Chamberlain’s accordion making an enjoyably nasal stand-in for the usual harmonium – were matched by the iridescent hues cast across the performers by the setting Orcadian sun streaming through St Magnus’s stained glass. Classical concerts seldom feel so downright uplifting. ■