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Members' Newsletter 11 Jan 2018

Congratulations to Jenny!

We send our congratulations and best wishes to Jenny McGregor Smith. Her British Empire Medal for services to the community in Bromsgrove was gazetted in the New Year's Honours list. She was a founding member of Bromsgrove Concerts and is one of our Vice Presidents. In more recent times Jenny was the driving force behind the Tardebigge Concerts of English Song which launched the careers of many now-famous singers. We are looking forward to the weekend of 'Exploring Shostakovich' concerts and events (26–28 October 2018), which she is organising through the Festive Classics charity.

News

Christopher Morley of the Birmingham Post classed our concert on 3 February 2017 as one of his highlights of the year in the article published on 28 December 2017. He wrote: '...and Mark Bebbington gave Bromsgrove Concerts a gripping insight into the music of Robert Matthew-Walker, writer, editor and polymath, with his Hamlet Fantasy-Sonata and the premiere of A Bad Night in Los Angeles.'

It is sad to note that Trinity Publishing, owners of Birmingham Post, will no longer have staff concert reviewers. The paper used to include our programme in its August preview of events and sent its reviewers into our 'backwoods' at least once a year. To mark this loss, copies of the two reviews: the Castalian String Quartet 29 Sept. and Ensemble DeNote 17 Nov.2017 are attached at the end.

Help is needed

We need a number of volunteers to join the rota of persons who provide suppers for artists. Artists arrive at Artrix about 5 pm and usually rehearse and have a light meal before the performance. Bromsgrove Concerts is noted for the quality of its hospitality but we need additional volunteers to replace members who are no longer able to help. Please talk to Chris Cooke during the intervals to find out what is involved.

Information for holders of Rover tickets

We are expecting audiences larger than usual for the two recital concerts on 19 January (Craig Ogden) and 9 February (Leon McCawley). It's likely that there will be a lot of customers who haven't pre-booked their tickets, resulting in queues at the box office. It would be a great help if you could book your Rover ticket in advance by emailing the box office at boxoffice@artrix.org.uk or ringing them on 01527 577330 with details of your postcode and the number of tickets you want.

From the box-office returns for the first half of the season, we notice that some of you have already used up more the half of your Rover allocations. We still have excellent concerts to come, for which you can top up your Rover tickets with an additional Rover4 costing £64.

Advance notice of the first concert in the 2018-19 season

We are pleased to announce that Emily Sun, the winner of the 2017 Bromsgrove International Musicians' Competition, will open the season on **5 October 2018**. The concert will be held in the new **Routh Hall** at Bromsgrove School.

We will provide information about parking and access to Routh Hall when we send you next year's programme leaflet. We will be making special arrangements for the box office on that evening. Our second concert of the season returns to Artrix in November, following the Shostakovich weekend organised by our friends at Festive Classics.

Our membership

We remember with regret and affection those long standing members who died during the year. We send best wishes to members who now find it difficult to come out to Artrix on cold winter evenings.

We are pleased that our membership is holding up. We have been able to recruit new members but we also have welcomed back some who had not subscribed recently. The number of people buying single tickets on the night has, however, gone down, even though we are spending extra on marketing and publicity. Please help us increase our audiences by encouraging your friends and neighbours to enjoy a good evening out at one of our last four concerts.

Some thoughts about contemporary chamber music

In each of the last four concerts there is a contemporary piece of music. I hope that a brief introduction to these may enhance your enjoyment of the performances. Over the last 20 years I've sought out performances of this music and have learnt more about it, but I'm writing this as an amateur without any academic expertise.

It is claimed that the first piece of modern music was composed by Claude Debussy: 'Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune', a symphonic poem for orchestra, lasting about 10 minutes. It was first performed in December 1894.

Starting from the flute entry there is no sense of pulse. Long phrases are followed by short clusters, breaking up any sense of time. There is also no sense of pitch or home key, in fact all twelve notes of the chromatic scale are used with near equal importance. In this work and others produced in the last part of his career, Debussy is influenced by non-European music, such as Indonesian Gamelan, which has

different ways of dealing with time and duration. This establishes the freedoms that are explored by the generations that followed after 1918.

Schoenberg was the teacher to go to in the Vienna of the 1920s. Instead of the freedom found in L'après-midi, music was now governed by rules. The first thing that was 'verboten' was that 'you can't use a pitch until you have used all twelve notes.' This is the basis of serial technique.

It is 123 years since L'après-midi. This is too long ago for all music since then to be considered 'contemporary'. I would regard music written in the early part of the 20th century – say, until the death of Shostakovich in August 1975, to use an arbitrary point in time – as 'modern' and music written since then as 'contemporary'. Some composers obviously bridge this division.

Since the 2010/11 season the committee has programmed the works of 24 'modern' composers and 26 'contemporary' composers. In the modern list are the string quartet masterpieces of Bartok and Shostakovich. These classics would have been difficult at first hearing, and many would have found them uncomfortably dissonant, but with time have come to be appreciated as the great works they are.

In the last concert of this season, the Van Kuijk String Quartet will play Gyorgy Ligeti's String Quartet No1: Metamorphoses nocturnes. There are at least ten performances of this quartet available on YouTube: just type 'Ligeti String Quartet 1 YouTube' into your search engine. Listen to this with Janet Upward's excellent programme note in the season's programme book. On 6 Jan 2018, Radio 3 broadcast a review of the works of Ligeti on CD. This was a good introduction to his music and is available on the BBCi-Player.

What of recent contemporary music? How does it come into being? The simple answer is that somebody asks for a new piece to be written. Bromsgrove Concerts has commissioned pieces in the past, but also supports commissioning in other ways. The chamber music of David Matthews, Ian Venables and Peteris Vasks is basically tonal and very clear. There is unfortunately no YouTube upload of the David Matthews piece, which will be played on 2 March. The guitar sonata by Nigel Westlake to be played on 19 January comes with a full description by the composer and should be instantly understandable. Craig Ogden will be interviewed on the Tammy Gooding afternoon show on BBC Hereford & Worcester Friday, 12 Jan at 2pm and should be available on BBCiplayer.

In next year's programme we are already looking to take the repeat performances of one new work and of another where the group has recently recorded the quartets of a contemporary composer.

Reviews

'Formed only six years ago, **the Castalian String Quartet** has quickly developed into an ensemble of equals, homogeneous in tone and with no dominant member to imperil their balanced sound. They opened the 55th season of Bromsgrove Concerts with Haydn's Quartet in E Flat, Op 76 No 6, and ended the concert with Beethoven's A minor Quartet, Op 132 – both late and somewhat experimental works, a quality which the Castalian did much to embrace. It resulted in a neatly polished account of the Haydn, its understated humour nicely unforced (although some twiddly passage work in the Allegretto was not precisely smack in tune) and an adagio that almost dripped with expressive significance. Nothing bland here.

And the players' response to the ebb and flow of Beethoven's opening Allegro was always mindful of the restlessness beneath the notes, while the slow movement's simple beauty was never overdressed – and became even more poignant as a consequence – with a final section so entranced it seemed as if Beethoven didn't want to let go.

Just as hypnotic, though in a totally different musical language, was 'The Four Quarters' by Thomas Ades. Although extremely formidable on a technical level, this evocation of times in a day has a classical elegance that, despite its atonality, is totally arresting. With such devices as aggressive pizzicatos, extended harmonics and an ear tingling single-note ostinato in the Serenade, this wonderfully engaging work sounded like a series of aural abstract paintings and the Castalian executed it with dazzling aplomb.'

David Hart

Ensemble DeNOTE, Artrix, Bromsgrove *****

Disbelief had to be suspended, initially unwillingly, when faced with the prospect of Mozart's sublime Gran' Partita for 13 wind instruments, one of the greatest works in the entire canon, being given in a version for a motley quintet of keyboard, strings and clarinet. But in this performance for Bromsgrove Concerts of Schwencke's transcription, though not quite achieving the essence of the piece's ineffability, the Ensemble DeNOTE delivered it with a graceful awareness of its radiance.

The keyboard, John Irving's beautiful fortepiano, sustains many of the textures (repeated woodwind chords are convincingly transferred to the instrument's tactilely responsive articulation), violin, viola and cello stand in for horns, bassoons and whatever else with great success, with only the rare halting phrasing making us regret the absence of suave winds, and the clarinetist (here the heroic Jane Booth) sweetly reminds us of the work's provenance.

This was an enthralling account, as was that of Mozart's Kegelstatt Trio which opened the evening, rich in empathy and interplay. Booth's boxwood clarinet oozed milky balm, Oliver Wilson's viola was throatily pungent (how moving to consider Mozart probably wrote the part for himself), and Irving's fortepiano drew us in immediately with its intimate, inward looking tones. Irving's instrument here had sounded properly self-effacing. Left to itself in Haydn's Sonata No 49 in E Flat, it emerged as a vehicle for clarity and delight as well as conveying an awareness of Haydn's exploratory side, shafting a sunlight which heavier modern instruments cannot help but shroud.

Christopher Morley (Birmingham Post, 23 November 2017)

Ensemble DeNote's CD

Ensemble DeNote's newly released CD has catalogue number **Devine Music SKU: DMCD007**. It includes the Kegelstatt Trio K498. The CD was reviewed by Nicholas Kenyon in the Observer on 03.12.17: 'Superbly inflected performances by period-instrument specialists, Ensemble DeNote bring gorgeously subtle colouring, with John Irving's fortepiano and Jane Booth's clarinet outstanding.'

On the Devine Music webpage <https://www.devinemusic.co.uk/> has information about the genesis of the CD. The disc grew out of a stage show – a trailer for this can be seen at <https://vimeo.com/177554277>.

Richard Sugden, Committee member