

Review of 2018 Festival

The heat wave of June continued into early July – would it hold out for us to enjoy a glass of chilled something in the interval while the last of the sun lit up the churchyard, as Chris Symons dreamed of in his programme notes? Well, just about.

Our new (pre-owned) mini-marquee certainly made serving the drinks easier for those behind the bar and it looked very smart too. However, on the first Friday the evening was dull and chilly and few people stayed outside before the concert long enough to admire it.

But to the music! The Allegri Quartet had arrived in good time for a thorough afternoon rehearsal and gave a scintillating evening performance. They opened with what was possibly a new work for the Festival, Wolf's Italian Serenade, a light-hearted piece, possibly a love song; it was delightful music; I must see if he has written anything else we could programme another year. Then, to celebrate his centenary year, Debussy's String quartet in G minor, a four movement work with a variety of textures, iridescent harmonies and a structure reminiscent of a long journey.

However, for me, the highlight of this first concert was Dvorak's American quartet (Quartet number 12 in F). Started just before his return to Bohemia after some 3 years in the USA and completed a few months later, it reflects his joy on returning to his homeland. There are American influences, as in the "New World" symphony, elements of homesickness and thanksgiving for a return home, and, to conclude, an exuberant, virtuosic finale.

The second concert was all English music; rarely do we "theme" concerts, but this worked excellently, an event to be savoured. Purcell's Chacony, with its theme and variations, was followed by Britten's first string quartet. This, according to a Tweet posted enthusiastically after the concert, inspired at least one audience member to become a Britten convert. For me, however, Elgar's Op. 83 with its "captured sunlight" and fiery finale was the high point of the evening.

By the second weekend of the Festival the heat wave had returned; before both concerts people sat outside enjoying a glass of wine in the evening sunshine, while later arrivals queued to buy tickets at the door. It was an evening of "Viennese" pieces on the Friday, no, not Strauss waltzes, but compositions, by Schubert, Mozart and Beethoven, all written in that cultural capital of Europe. Raffy Todes, 2nd violin, had some time out while his fellow players performed Schubert's four movement String Trio, with its bravura moments for 1st violin Martyn Jackson and an opportunity for Dot Vogel, viola, to shine in the third movement. Cellist Ness Lucas-Smith had a prominent role in the third movement of Mozart's String Quartet in A major, K464 which has a drum-like bass line which gives the quartet its nickname, the "Drum". To draw the concert to its end The Allegri treated us to one of Beethoven's late quartets, no. 127; a glorious and eloquent piece to send the audience home in an upbeat but thoughtful mood.

We reconvened two evenings later with sun's warmth continuing to lift the spirits. The Allegri posed for some atmospheric photos beneath the willow trees as the audience found their seats or enjoyed the early evening light in the churchyard – look for these pictures elsewhere on our website or Facebook page. A capacity audience hushed for the first piece of the evening, a fugue from Bach's Art of Fugue. Alas, it was over too quickly for me – I am in thrall to the music of Bach and could have listened to several more fugues (perhaps

another year) but time pressed on and there were quintets to enjoy. We welcomed the return of guest violist Norbert Blume, who came to Llanfyllin in 2014. Norbert joined the Allegri for Mozart's String quintet no. 4 in G minor. Chris Symons, in his superb programme notes described the quintet as a work of shifting moods, with many dark corners. The complexity of inner voices with the addition of a second viola enhanced those moods, but the work ended with a joyful allegro to dispel any gloom. The last interval over, glasses put away, the church lights dimmed – we were ready for Brahms's string quintet number 1. Op. 88. This three movement work starts with a sense of warmth, with elegant interchanges between the instruments and rich textures. The second, slower, movement is a re-working of two of the composer's piano pieces (why not make the most of a good piece of music) while the third, *allegro energico*, is full of action. Brahms wrote to his publisher about this quintet "You have never before had such a beautiful work from me". We were indeed privileged to have a performance that did full justice to this jewel of chamber music. Surely, an excellent conclusion to the 2018 Festival.

We hope to welcome you all at next year's Festival.