

The Mahler Players: Britten, Mahler, Longworth and Pärt

Eden Court

* * * *

by Margaret Chrystall

THE Mahler Players' journey forwards in time through Gustav Mahler's works stopped off at two sets of songs the group's musical director believes are the composer's greatest – possibly the finest ever written.

Though the latest in the chamber ensemble **Mahler In Miniature** series saw a slightly smaller number of musicians at just 15, the three dates included an expansion into Eden Court, the Highlands' biggest arts centre, with a capacity audience attending for Thursday's debut performance.

The OneTouch crowd was treated to an intriguing programme combining work written by young composers, plus the mature signature sound of Mahler and Arvo Pärt.

Benjamin Britten was just 18 when he composed the concert's opener *Sinfonietta No 1* and you couldn't find fresher than the world premiere of twentysomething Scottish composer Peter Longworth's specially-commissioned piece for Mahler Players, *Pan's Caprice*.

Arvo Pärt's *Fratres* – written in 1977 – was performed in celebration of the Estonian composer's 80th birthday this year.

And the contrast between appreciating established classics such as Mahler's songs – first performed in 1905 – and a first hearing of Longworth's brand-new work made for an exhilarating listening experience.

But it was the Britten that limbered up ears and imagination with the *Sinfonietta*. In the second movement the violin duet stood out as the two lines wrap themselves round each other in a strident, sinuous way. But it was a virtuoso performance from the whole group, delivering the precision and attack demanded by the piece.

Subtlety and musicality are needed to frame the voice in the Rückert-Lieder that followed. And though the *raison d'être* of the Mahler In Miniature series is to bring chamber versions of the composer's work to the Highlands, the programme notes by director Tomas Leakey pointed out that the songs had originally been scored for a small orchestra, so the arrangement used wasn't too far from what the composer intended.

The five songs incorporate a range of subjects, from the playfulness of the 'shy' songwriter reluctant to unveil his work to contemplating the nature of love, faith in God, the solitude needed for creativity to the profound simplicity in the pleasure of composing expressed in *Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen* (*I am lost to the world*) and its final words: "...I live alone in my own heaven, in my love, in my song".

Mezzo soprano Laura Kelly McInroy brought a warmth and lyrical quality to the songs that peaked with the intimacy the Players created in the ending of *I am lost to the world*. And just as the music died away, the violin's deliberately slow glissando up to its final high note seemed spine-tinglingly modern.

There was enthusiastic applause after Peter Longworth's *Pan's Caprice*, the playful, quirky piece opening with simultaneous stabs of trumpet and wooden block, runs of clarinet and flute, frantically

scrubbing strings, before a fleeting silence, as a gentle flute solo and triangle heralded the arrival of Pan – represented, the composer's programme note told us – by the bass clarinet. A come-hither piccolo motif represented Syrinx, the nymph who had spurned him and a tarantella-style dance with trumpet and tambourine seemingly far in the distance finally led towards Pan's abrupt disappearance. But a clearly-delighted composer appeared onstage afterwards to thank the musicians.

The Players' performance of Arvo Pärt's *Fratres* made a soothing if slightly pacy meditation as a preparation to return to Mahler and the Kindertotenlieder. In that, baritone Douglas Nairne's performance — from the first song *Nun will die Sonn' so hell aufgeh'n* (*Now will the sun as brightly rise*) where the grieving parent shares the isolation felt as the world goes on regardless — tapped directly into Mahler's expression of the pain of losing a child and an acceptance, as the songs end.

The Players' concert set up intriguing musical cross-references and contrasts, while the evening's performances delivered an emotional high.

For the future, the Mahler Players plan to perform the composer's 5th, 9th and 10th symphonies and *Song Of The Earth*.

For more on the Mahler Players: www.mahlerplayers.co.uk

Twitter: @mahlerplayers