

central set of variations was especially felicitous, investing each variant with its own personality and colour.

After the interval, cellist Jonathan Swensen joined the ensemble for more repertoire seldom encountered in concert: Albert Roussel's *Sérénade* for flute, violin, viola, cello and harp, op.30 (1925). Piquantly melodic, this finely crafted piece was well served in a performance which married technical bravura and interpretative insight. The enigmatic central *Andante* made a perfect foil for the vigorous outer movements and the whole score unfolded with a delightful sense of adventure deserving of the warm reception it received from a capacity audience.

A last-minute alteration in the schedule meant that, in place of the advertised Debussy String Quartet, the concert closed with a dazzling rendition of Eleanor Alberga's String Quartet no.1 of 1993. Inspired by a lecture on physics and space, this substantial three-movement work is a compelling mixture of fizzing energy and fathomless stasis, forged miraculously into a cogent entity. The spiky opening movement's marking of *Détaché et martellato e sehr lebhaft and swing it man* gives a flavour of its audaciously eclectic spirit. It made a strong impression with its rhythmic variety and rich counterpoint. Spaciously conceived, the nocturne-like middle movement is, in the words of the composer, 'a vision of matter colliding, separating and massing in space'. The sense of scale and weightlessness suggested by this description was amply conveyed by the players' airy, hypnotic and superbly controlled account. A decidedly earthy finale rounded off the work in a joyous celebration of the dance. With its uncompromising dissonances and metrical complexity, Alberga's dynamic quartet poses many challenges. In response, Thomas Bowes, Jacqueline Shave, Andres Kaljuste and Jonathan Swensen put their considerable collective artistry entirely at the service of this punchy, exacting and thrillingly individual score.

This opening recital of the 2017 Arcadia Festival was typically ambitious. Its adventurous selection of pieces was rewarded by consummate and fresh-sounding performances. The 2018 series of concerts set in the beautiful Welsh-Shropshire border country should on no account be missed.

Paul Conway

Trondheim Chamber Music Festival, Norway

Sally Beamish was composer-in-residence at the 21st Trondheim Chamber Music Festival and a broad spectrum of her output for chamber and instrumental forces was explored in a variety of local venues during the six days (26 September – 1 October 2017) of this imaginatively staged event. Assimilating jazz and folk elements, Beamish's authentic musical voice has an inherent flexibility and diversity which lends itself to this sort of detailed coverage. As a considerable bonus the programmes built around her works were chosen with considerable care and enterprise with a particular emphasis on folk music.

Beamish's *Variations on a theme of Britten* for string orchestra (2013) was the centrepiece of an early-evening event held in the intimacy and tranquillity of Trondheim's Our Lady Church, a small, ornate medieval stone building. Conceived as a companion to Britten's *Variations on a theme of Frank Bridge*, Beamish's *Variations* presents a series of vignettes based on the viola and cello theme in the second Sea Interlude, 'Sunday Morning', from *Peter Grimes*. Echoing her distinguished model, Beamish begins her work with fanfare-like, prefatory flourishes before revealing the theme and concludes with an intricately woven Passacaglia. Between these elaborate framing sections a sequence of expertly crafted miniatures opens up new perspectives on Britten's original melody. It includes a languid Barcarolle, an offbeat

Quadrille and a deeply felt Requiem succeeded by an uplifting Paen. With the use of *divisi* writing, mutes and effects such as glissandos, tremolos and pizzicatos (though not harmonics, which are pointedly absent), Beamish draws a conspicuously rich array of sonorities from a relatively small body of strings. The Trondheim Soloists were alert and responsive to the distinctive personality of the warm and witty individual character studies. They also showed a clear grasp of the score's overall trajectory and this acute sense of structure is a key ingredient in any successful interpretation of Beamish's meticulously fashioned music.

Earlier in the evening the Trondheim players gave a spirited account of Mozart's Adagio and Fugue in C minor and provided a rare chance to hear the evocative *Pastorale* by Fartein Valen for organ solo in an arrangement for strings. Also in the concert we heard a number of Norwegian psalms arranged by Thomas Klingo (1634-1703), performed with disarming sincerity by Unni Boksasp and accompanied by organist (and, at one stage, spontaneous yodeller) Henning Sommerro.

Sommerro also featured as composer in the last scheduled item on the programme. Based on original themes influenced by Nordic tunes, *Chrysilis*, for violin, harp and strings (2017) was powerfully communicative with an elemental approach symbolised by the use of the note C as a tonal anchor. The first three movements conjured up the essence of folk music from Scotland (Fife), Denmark (Sjælland) and Norway (Sunndalen) before bringing these various strands



Sally Beamish

together in a joyously synoptic finale. Paying tribute to the unique talents of soloists Chris Stout on Shetland fiddle and Catriona McKay on Scottish harp, Sombrero incorporated improvised passages, notably in the closing movement. Linking the traditional music of Scotland and Scandinavia, this immensely enjoyable work encapsulated the festival's unifying message in its bold, convivial and infectiously toe-tapping gestures. The vital stage presence of Chris Stout and Catriona McKay was a delight and these intuitive musicians were sensitively supported by the Trondheim Soloists. As a moving encore, Stout and McKay gave us a heartfelt rendition of *Michaelswood*, a finely-etched portrait of a forest of remembrance in Shetland. The two players' poise and stillness drew the listeners in to their tender dialogue and the evanescent closing bars had a powerful and lasting impact on the capacity audience.

Later the same evening a relaxed and informal event entitled '100% Beamish' took place in the auditorium of the Dokkhuset, a former pumping station converted into a stylish waterfront venue. Of the three featured Beamish works, *Naming of Birds* (2000) is an exotic wind quintet in five movements, each of which features a different player as soloist representing a specific bird: horn (partridge); oboe (lapwing); flute/piccolo (linnet, corn bunting); bassoon (barn owl, and clarinet (bullfinch). These avian characters are lightly shaded, their songs adroitly woven into the fabric of the material. The five players, from the Trondheim Symphony Orchestra, relished their opportunities to take the spotlight as soloists and to display their collective musicianship in dialogue with their colleagues.

Bridging the Day, for cello and piano (1998) is an eloquent tone poem reflecting the changing light at certain times of day on a bridge over a brook. Cellist Øystein Sonstad was partnered by Sally Beamish at the keyboard in this tightly constructed single movement. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the performance had the ring of authenticity with the composer's personal involvement. The different sections of the piece were sharply defined and the work's central peak depicting the flight of a heron was deeply expressive. Equally moving was the closing section, representing sundown, with its varied reprise of the opening

material and cathartic closing bars. In this illuminating and inspiring account the music's inexorable arc seemed to mirror the cycle of life. Such is the subtle, allusive power of Beamish's art.

The Seafarer, for voice and piano trio (2000) is inspired by a poem of the same name contained in an ancient manuscript at Exeter Cathedral. Combining ideas from prehistoric paganism with those of Christianity, it traces Gilgamesh, the first man in history, in his quest for eternal life, using the metaphor of a sea-voyage. The poem contains striking imagery and mentions of gull, curlew, gannet and ospreys opens up possibilities for musical representation of these birds. This beguiling live performance made the best possible case for having a spoken narration as well as a chamber group to tell the story. These two different agencies complemented and enhanced each other, never vying for the listener's attention. The Trio Isimsiz impressed with the eloquence of their rapt, solo lines and drove the narrative on with their dramatic tuttis. To his role as speaker Peter Thomson brought an actor's understanding of characterisation and a director's instinct for dramatic flow. He took every opportunity to engage with the audience but was never intrusive, taking care to allow listeners to hear every line of the music where the words are accompanied (and enriched) by members of the piano trio. In this superbly integrated performance, the speaker became a fourth instrument in the telling of the tale not just in the third and fifth sections, which incorporate passages of Sprechstimme, but throughout, thanks to the musicality of Thomson's mellifluous reading. This palpable commonality of purpose resulted in a thoroughly engaging traversal of the score. Mention should also be made of the starkly powerful projected monoprints by Jila Peacock, adding another important dimension to the unfolding saga.

The diversity of Beamish's oeuvre is such that, although the three featured chamber pieces dated from a similar era, they could hardly have been more contrasted in mood, instrumental colour and impact. Each work was warmly received by the (predominantly young) audience, a tribute to the communicative ability of the multi-layered music and its dedicated performers.

Trondheim's Freemasons Hall was the setting for the ninth Trondheim Inter-

national Chamber Music Competition. Held in parallel with the festival, this contest provides a valuable opportunity for young international and national chamber music ensembles to further their career. The entrants chose to perform a variety of mainstream repertoire but they were all obliged to include in their recitals a new work, *3 Transfigurations* (2017) by Norwegian composer Lars Petter Hagen (b.1975). This proved to be a wise choice as the trio of related movements, all essentially hushed and contemplative, constituted a searching test of the players' ability to listen carefully to each other and sustain intensity. With wisps of material occasionally at the very borders of audibility, the score's ultrafine textures required subtlety and delicacy, qualities which may not have been so rigorously probed in more extrovert fare chosen by the players as a showpiece for their technique. In the performance I caught given by the Vienna-based Simply Quartet, Hagen's pellucid and shimmering textures were coaxed into being by the young Chinese and Norwegian musicians in a reading of rapt introspection. In the event the Simply Quartet came joint third whilst the competition was won by the Maxwell Quartet from Scotland.

Amid the 18th-century opulence of the Throne Room at the Stiftsgården, Trondheim's official royal residence, an evening concert focused on music for various stringed instruments. In the first half the Chilingirian Quartet played Sally Beamish's second quartet, 'Opus California' followed by the piece whose opening movement had inspired it: Beethoven's String Quartet op.18 no.4 in C minor. Hearing the pieces in this order underlined for listeners the droll, affectionate nature of Beamish's personal reimagining of the Beethoven original. Both were rendered with unvarnished honesty and gritty determination by the Chilingirians, an approach which arguably suited the Beethoven score rather more than Beamish's deft, jazzy and sophisticated tribute with its salute to American music and openness. Nevertheless, the players' earthy manner provided a fascinating contrast (even, conceivably, a corrective) to the Emperor Quartet's sleeker, more plushly appointed realisation of the score on their 2005 BIS recording.

After the interval, Ruth Potter was centre-stage in a selection of Beamish's music featuring the harp. *Awuya* (1998/

2005) is an enchanting piece for solo instrument which uses the emotive language of music to express the tragedy of sleeping sickness and the hope provided by scientific endeavour. It includes an important rhythmic element as it was partly inspired by African drumming. These rhythms, knocked out on the sound board, introduce the work and frame its poignant central lullaby, a tune taken from a central African tribe decimated by sleeping sickness in the 1940s. Ruth Potter conveyed the score's simplicity and nobility in a reading of quiet authority and natural charisma. *Thorns* for cello and harp (2008) was inspired by the sight of a rose defiantly flowering in January and the by the words of Hafez: 'no one plucks a single rose without the risk of a thorn'. This brief vignette explores the expressive potential of the two instruments and Ruth Potter and cellist Stephen Orton captured the purity and the spikiness of the work's inspiration. Receiving its world premiere, *Pavan* for harp and Scottish harp provided a quintessence of Beamish's eclectic art with its effortless fusion of Baroque and folk styles. Ruth Potter and Catriona McKay brought their individual and complementary artistry to a piece which revelled in the range of rich and delicate sonorities obtainable from its forces. To close the concert, the Chilingirians and double-bassist Katrine Ølgaard Sonstad joined forces with Ruth Potter for a notably elegant performance of Debussy's *Danses Sacrée et Profane*.

If the more popular and illustrative elements of *Opus California* were restrained in the Chilingirians' classical approach to the score, they were foregrounded by students of the Norwegian University of Science and Technology Music Department in an early morning 'Meet the Festival Composer' event in which the first two movements of the quartet and Beamish's Prelude and Canon for two violins (2005) were workshopped. It was fascinating to hear the quartet players conjuring up the misty vistas of an aerial view of the San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge as evoked in the slow movement of *Opus California*. Also impressive was the way both young violinists took on board the composer's suggestions to imbue the instrumental piece with the spirit of Scottish fiddle music and, where appropriate, the florid elegance of Baroque writing.

A late-night concert held in Nidaros

Cathedral featured a performance of Beamish's atmospheric *Chaconne* for solo organ given by Erling Aasgård. Based on a song by Robert Burns, 'The Slave's Lament', the piece consists of a number of increasingly intricate and vehement variants which exploit the intimate as well as more astringent qualities of the king of instruments. The muted subtleties and scrunching dissonances of Beamish's piece were in stark contrast to such ripe and straightforward fare as Elfrida André's Symphony in A flat for organ and brass in which Aasgård was joined by the Nordic Brass Ensemble. The dazzling prowess of these players was especially well served by Grieg's moving and sincere *Sørgemarch for Richard Nordraak* which made a powerful impression, as did the antiphonal works by Gabrieli and Corigliano and Gesualdo's *Tristis est Amina Mea*. The technical range of the Nordic Brass Ensemble was highly impressive throughout the evening's music making and the nobility and splendour of the setting also contributed in no small measure to a memorable occasion.

In purely musical terms, however, the festival's most indelible event for me was the beautifully lit performance of Beamish's *Botanical Drawings* for string quintet (2011). Taking place in Trondheim's Ringve Music Museum, which also has a botanical garden, it featured the composer as violist, playing on an instrument made by her daughter, Stephanie Irvine. Familial connections are also at the heart of the story which inspired the piece. Its themes are taken from a short opera concerning an embittered botanist near the end of her life who experiences an epiphany when her granddaughter wheels her chair into the conservatory where she used to work. Finding her plants, now run riot, and a book of her own botanical drawings reminds her of the purpose and focus of her life. The composer's painterly skills were to the fore as her music portrays the damp, rarefied atmosphere of the greenhouse with birdsong echoing through the glass. The single-movement score is built around four plants: The Lily, Travellers' Tree; Angel's Trumpet, and finally Passiflora in the form of a simple aria. After this the harsh and raging music first heard at the beginning of the piece erupts into a euphoric coda. Joining Beamish on viola were Øyvør Volle (violin), Pablo Hernán Benedí (violin), Øystein Sonstad (cello) and Katrine

Ølgaard Sonstad (double bass). The latter played a crucial role as the double bass frequently took centre stage, setting out much of the thematic material and incorporating improvisatory passages. All five players caught the music's bitter-sweet air with its shafts of radiance flickering through often gruff and gritty textures. They also ensured that the closing exultation was convincingly hard-won. *Botanical Drawings* was deeply affecting as an elusive but compelling tone poem and musically satisfying as a compact and cogently argued string quintet. The redemptive power of the tale depicted by the musical narrative found its way into Beamish's music which was characteristically expressive, fluent and finely drawn but also invested with raw emotional honesty that connected instantly with the highly appreciative audience.

The 2017 Trondheim Chamber Music Festival offered a splendidly wide-ranging survey of Sally Beamish's works for small forces in performances of distinction and commitment. It was especially pleasing to have an opportunity to hear pieces such as the *Britten Variations*, *The Naming of Birds* and *Botanical Drawings* which have not received the number of performances (or, indeed recordings) their manifest quality suggests they deserve. Perhaps the most arresting aspect of Beamish's music reinforced by these thoughtful and refreshing interpretations is its innate versatility, whether deriving inspiration from a noted forerunner or from ideas of folk or popular origin. This ability to produce satisfying and viable contributions to so many different fields is a rare gift and one which was celebrated with exceptional understanding and inventiveness by the Trondheim Festival organisers.

Paul Conway

Edinburgh Festival – 70 years on

The 2017 EIF marked its anniversary with a spectacular light display which captured the imagination of late night crowds and caused bottlenecks for those wanting to get home. For many the fringe is still getting much of the media attention, however the 'official' programme seemed a little off-putting because of the absence of top class orchestras.

A feature were concert performances at the Usher Hall of three Monteverdi operas (marking the 450th birth anniversary