



Summer reveries

Michael White reports on the highs and lows of the festival season, from Cheltenham to Ryedale

The Essex town of Thaxted has assorted claims to fame, but for the most part they relate to its medieval parish church: a building of cathedral-like magnificence that in the 20th century attracted interesting priests and still more interesting musicians. Gustav Holst was Thaxted's organist during the early years of World War I, founding a festival that still runs in the church and is a thriving model of what festivals should be.

The place is good for chamber music, and I went there principally to hear the premiere of a string quartet by Noah Max (a young composer making waves), thinking I might as well stay on for what would likely be a standard, small-scale show of Donizetti's comic opera *The Elixir of Love*. As things turned out, though, the quartet was disappointing while the opera was a joy beyond all expectation – sassily delivered by a touring company called Wild Arts, and outstandingly well-sung.

That little companies like this can get such brilliant singers, worthy of far grander stages, demonstrates the overflow of vocal talent in the UK. And of no less brilliance in the show was an accordionist, Iñigo Mikeleiz, who proved to be the star of the reduced-down orchestration. His

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panache and charm stays in my mind.

But so does an irreverent reflection on the piece itself, which plays out like an allegory (somewhat skewed) about belief and faith. The narrative of *Elixir* concerns a “love potion” that, while entirely bogus, sort of works – so nobody feels cheated and the end result is happiness all round. I wouldn't call this sound theology, but it gives pause for thought.

Another festival that carried a surprise was Cheltenham, where I went to see a different take on the 400th-anniversary events for William Byrd, which are ubiquitous this year. We know Byrd as the defiant Catholic in Tudor England who wrote secret settings of the Mass. He was also the composer of secular music for viols, recorders and voices to perform in domestic settings. Cheltenham's idea was to play this music in private houses, with a circulating audience going from door to door.

It was a neat idea (and interesting to see the houses), but not terribly well done, with unremarkable performances. Far better was a morning concert at the Pittville Pump Room given by a group whose name meant nothing to me (though it certainly does now), the Leonkoro Quartet. Founded four years ago, in Germany, it's an elite ensemble: youthful, vigorous, intense. And joined by pianist Elizabeth Braun, they gave a mesmerising performance of Schumann's Piano Quintet: one of the great classics of the chamber repertoire, where every movement is a winner, but transformed here into something of still higher order. I do not exaggerate. It felt like being touched by God, which doesn't happen every day.

In God's own county, Yorkshire, the divine touch is no doubt more common. In my experience, it's almost standard at the Ryedale Festival, which happens in the stately homes and ancient churches that adorn the landscape around Helmsley, Malton, Ampleforth and other places of enchantment

north of York. The abbey church at Ampleforth is a chief venue for the festival, and last month it was one of several platforming the choir of Pembroke College, Cambridge with their supercharged director Anna Lapwood, who was very much “in residence” at Ryedale.

There is no escape these days from Lapwood: she's become a public face of British choral music and, as BBC presenters tell us, an “ambassador” for organ-playing. To my ear, she's not so special as an organist, but as a choir-director she has undeniably achieved a great deal. Pembroke choir was nothing a few years ago. Now it's beginning to enjoy the sort of profile of the Cambridge heavyweights – Clare, Trinity, King's, John's – and that's entirely down to her.

But it's an odd choir, with a sound that's disconcertingly unbalanced. Lapwood is an advocate for women in church-music, both as singers and composers. Which is totally commendable. But listening to her choir at Ryedale, I was struck by the attention on the upper voices, while the lower ones retreated into the background, compromising an impressive concert in the Sledmere House estate church that contained, among assorted treasures, an extraordinary piece by the composer Kerensa Briggs – a name to watch.

My Ryedale highlights, though, lay elsewhere: in a breathtaking account of Reynaldo Hahn's little-known Piano Quintet by the Kaleidoscope Chamber Collective; a magical French programme by the charismatic keyboard star-in-waiting George Fu; and larger-than-life tenor Nicky Spence with festival director/pianist Christopher Glynn in Britten's sombre settings of the Holy Sonnets of John Donne. I had forgotten (till I read the programme) that Donne, who ended up the dean of protestant St Paul's, was born and raised a Catholic. It didn't help the torment, guilt and fear of death that haunt his sonnets. And how Britten excavates their darkness! It's unbearable – albeit in the scorchingly cathartic way of great art.