

got off to a cracking start in his new role as the festival's patron



Musical masterpiece from a spellbinding Osborne

MUSIC
STEVEN OSBORNE
DUNBAR PARISH CHURCH
★★★★★

BBC SSO
ST MARY'S PARISH CHURCH, HADDINGTON
★★★

PIANIST Steven Osborne began his Wednesday evening Lammermuir Festival recital in Dunbar Parish Church with playing so hesitant and fragile that it was tempting to wonder what on earth was going on. Sure, Schubert's music is full of introspection and troubled undercurrents, but there was an almost ghostly quality to Osborne's A flat Moment musical, shattered by a sudden explosion of anguish.

His sensitive, exquisitely blended and balanced playing almost goes without saying, but Osborne's masterstroke here was in his big vision of his programme: he grew and grew from the softly spoken Moment musical through increasingly impassioned Impromptus, D935, opening up huge reserves of energy and building to a fiery final F minor Impromptu. Schumann said that those four Impromptus formed a full-blown sonata – in Osborne's hands, all five of his Schubert pieces became one grand, overarching work that seemed to chart a journey from reticence into tumultuous, unsettling vigour.

It was a spellbinding achievement – and it set the tone magnificently for Osborne's vivid, fantastical set of Rachmaninov Études-tableaux after the interval (the first of which, Op33 No1 in the same F minor, bridged the break beautifully and seemed to pick up where Osborne's Schubert had left off). He never forgot that, even if the composer was reluctant to say what they described, these pieces are pictures in music, with granitic chords in Op39 No7, a singing, folk-like naivety to Op33 No8, and a beautifully rippling layered texture in Op39 No2.

Osborne's concluding march – Op39 No9 – ended his remarkable recital in fire and fury – save for a limpid, caressing encore of Debussy's Prélude Canope, which sent us back to the troubled introspection of the opening. It was a provocative, magical evening, and a fine beginning for Osborne in his new role as the Lammermuir Festival's patron.

There was more Rachmaninov the following evening – the gargantuan Second Symphony from the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra under Norwegian conductor Eivind Hadland, in St Mary's Church, Haddington – but it was rather less convincing. The warm, resonant church acoustics that had brought such a bloom to the Scottish Chamber Orchestra's crisp Eroica Symphony the previous weekend here simply seemed to muddle Rachmaninov's richer, more indulgent harmonies. The problems started in the concert's opener, a bracingly forthright Sibelius Finlandia, urged on by Hadland with superbly gleaming, growling brass – which were so prominent that it was sometimes hard to hear that anyone else was playing. When it came to the more complex Rachmaninov, it seemed as though Hadland was trying to keep more of a lid on things, with the result that the Symphony felt good-natured and jovial rather than gripping and compelling. Maybe some music simply is too big for that setting.

In between, though, came a beautifully judged Brahms Double Concerto, with two of the Festival's visiting Michelangelo Quartet – violinist Mihaela Martin and cellist Frans Helmerson – as soloists. There was enormous concentration in their account – with Helmerson in particular providing a masterclass in putting impeccable technique at the service of searing musicality – and Hadland drove the orchestra on with graceful, supple inner energy, using the church's warm resonance to complement his contained, focused vision of the piece.

DAVID KETTLE