

Edinburgh

David Kettle chooses his pick of the string events from this year's Edinburgh International Festival and Fringe



Musical storytelling: Anne-Sophie Mutter and her **Virtuosi**

It felt like quite a piano-centric Edinburgh International Festival this year, with such starry keyboard names as Lang Lang, Yuja Wang, Yefim Bronfman and Angela Hewitt jetting in for the occasion. And with new festival director Fergus Linehan moving away from the event's previous thematic focus in favour of showcasing prominent artists, there was a profusion of big cultural hitters in town – across theatre, dance, rock and jazz, as well as classical music. But never fear, string lovers: as ever, there was plenty to inspire and entertain, even if the string focus felt more strongly slanted in the direction of chamber music.

Concerto-wise, however, the festival's biggest draw was – perhaps predictably – **Nicola Benedetti**, who gave quite a contained, reflective performance of Glazunov's Violin Concerto with the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra under Vasily Petrenko (Usher Hall, 16 August). Where the orchestra seemed to be bursting to be let loose, pushed on hard by Petrenko's energetic direction, Benedetti was altogether more reserved, with a clear focus on the letter of the music, even if she indulged in some appropriately late-Romantic portamento and thick, wide vibrato. It was a strongly characterised account, but it also felt like a series of vivid episodes rather

than a single, long, evolving structure – considered, certainly, but perhaps lacking a little in flamboyance.

Considered but also flamboyant – in its own way – was Anne-Sophie Mutter's concert with her **Mutter Virtuosi** (26 August), a collection of budding young string soloists she's mentoring and leading in recitals around the world. She nicely contrasted ancient and modern, opening with Penderecki's 2011 Duo concertante for violin and double bass (given a thrillingly dark, turbulent reading by Mutter and bassist Roman Patkoló) and continuing with the world premiere of a brand new string nonet by André Previn. It is a big, assured, thoroughly lyrical work, even in its extensive dissonance, and the pristine performance from Mutter's ensemble made it feel as if they'd been playing it for years, balancing rhythmic assertiveness with Romantic indulgence in its hushed second movement. Mutter then leapt back 300 years for Bach's 'Double' Concerto, making a problematic if well-meaning decision to partner with a different member of her young entourage for each movement. Mutter's sound was big-boned throughout, matched well by Nancy Zhou in the first movement, although Ye-Eun Choi seemed far too reticent in a rather plodding slow movement and Noa Wildschut simply couldn't match her mentor's violinistic power in a hectic finale. In her closing Vivaldi *Four Seasons*, however, Mutter was agile and lithe, with some brilliantly musical storytelling.

Over in the Queen's Hall were some exceptional string chamber recitals, kicked off by the all-star **Zimmermann Trio** (15 August) – violinist Frank Peter Zimmermann, violist Antoine Tamestit and cellist Christian Poltéra, all playing Stradivaris. The players brilliantly balanced soloistic individuality with ensemble elegance, Tamestit in particular responding gleefully to his colleagues' every gesture. They contrasted a turbulent, extrovert Hindemith Second String Trio with a delightfully high-spirited Beethoven Trio in E flat major op.3.



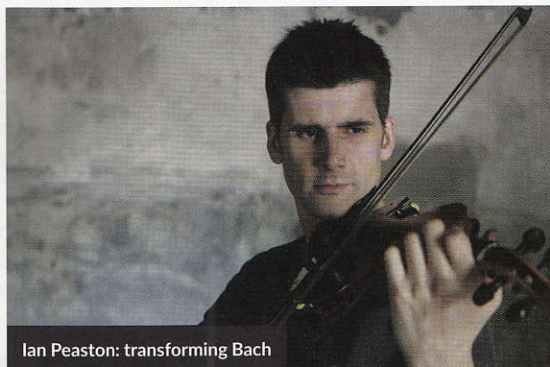
The Zimmermann Trio: individuality and elegance

MUTTER PHOTO: HYUCK MOON; ZIMMERMANN TRIO PHOTO: MATS BÄCKER

The similarly all-star **Arcanto Quartet** – Antje Weithaas and Daniel Sepec (violins), Tabea Zimmermann (viola) and Jean-Guihen Queyras (cello) – gave a more variable recital (28 August). There was no doubting its thrilling incisiveness and lyrical charm, on display to astonishing effect in a very moving Britten Third Quartet, supple and understated. But its account of Schubert's gargantuan Quartet in G major D887 felt far too violent and angry – you could tell how hard the musicians were playing by the rosin residue caking their instruments at the end. There's no denying it was vivid, but by drawing back a bit the ensemble might have made the performance more effective.

Equally forthright in their playing – first violinist Geoff Nuttall in particular – were the members of the **St Lawrence Quartet**, in town for two concerts and something of a focus on John Adams. At the Queen's Hall they gave an enormously energetic performance of his First Quartet (25 August), putting their breathtakingly clear articulation and propulsive power at the service of hugely charismatic, exuberant playing that never lost sight of the composer's sense of sonic fantasy. And over at the Usher Hall, they joined the San Francisco Symphony under Michael Tilson Thomas (27 August) for an equally ebullient account of Adams's wry Beethoven tribute *Absolute Jest*, bringing exceptional focus to the sometimes dense quartet-meets-orchestra textures, even if they occasionally came down on the serious side of Adams's mischievous humour. The years they've spent working with the composer were evident in their assured, authoritative playing.

Over among the good, the bad and the ugly of the Fringe, two string events clearly stood out. Violinist **Ian Peaston** had put together the innocuously titled show *Violin Variations* (29 August); but, using an electric violin, laptop and carpet of foot pedals,



Ian Peaston: transforming Bach

he transformed Bach into Björk and Pärt into Massive Attack, conjuring expansive electronic textures through looping and transforming his violin sound. It could have felt like empty technological self-indulgence but his beautifully nuanced playing brought his music thrillingly alive.

Stranger still was to come at Forest Fringe, a kind of 'fringe of the Fringe', once based in Edinburgh's Forest Café (hence the name) but now taking over a converted army drill hall and focusing on live art and experimental theatre. *Seeping Through* was a 'durational' (extremely long) performance by writer and director Tim Etchells (artistic director of the Forced Entertainment theatre group) and Kazakh violinist **Aisha Orazbayeva** (20 August). Bringing together obsessively repeated fragments of text, enigmatic but seemingly pregnant with meaning, with similarly repeated, Lachenmann-like scratches and scrapes from Orazbayeva's violin, it was at once mystifying and utterly compelling; it seemed to dig deeper into the nature of sound and performance than anywhere else in these festivals, Orazbayeva's playing hypnotic and lyrical in its relentless repetitions. Despite its stubborn strangeness, it made for one of the festival's true string highlights. ●



Angry Schubert from the Arcanto Quartet



The St Lawrence Quartet: focusing on John Adams

ARCANTO PHOTO: MARCO BORGREVE; ST LAWRENCE PHOTO: LEONARDO MASCARO; PEASTON PHOTO: CREART