

SUSSE AHLBURG

**Sarah Connolly (mezzo soprano) Britten Sinfonia/Sian Edwards**

CADOGAN HALL 3 AUGUST 2013

The Britten Sinfonia's Saturday matinee BBC Prom, one in a series devoted to the music of Benjamin Britten, set the composer's music alongside that of his contemporaries Tippett, Holst and Lennox Berkeley. Stylistically, the concert brought home the neo-Classical tendency in early 20th-century music, with the Baroque-inspired fugues of Britten's Prelude and Fugue for 18 Strings (the Sinfonia's entries not always cleanly articulated) and Tippett's *Fantasia Concertante on a Theme of Corelli* (poised and precise, despite the greater technical challenges) taking flight in the programme.

But it also drew attention to the English taste for small string ensembles – the string consorts of earlier composers such as Purcell, for example, inspiring a 20th-century revival in string ensemble playing – with the Britten Sinfonia, under Sian Edwards, capturing the austere power that strings alone can produce. That power came to the fore when Sarah Connolly, after a recital of Berkeley's *Four Poems of St Teresa of Avila*, and fresh from Glyndebourne where she had been performing Phèdre in Rameau's *Hippolyte et Aricie*, unleashed a shattering performance of Britten's searing last vocal work, *Phaedra*. The Britten Sinfonia matched her expressive delivery at every turn in one of the festival's most memorable chamber recitals.

NICK SHAVE



Breathtaking pianissimos from Vilde Frang

**Vilde Frang (violin) BBC Philharmonic/John Størgårds**

ROYAL ALBERT HALL 6 AUGUST 2013

Bruch's First Violin Concerto formed the soft centre in a BBC Prom otherwise devoted to robust ceremonial music originally written for the present Queen's coronation, and also to Korngold's often hard-edged Symphony that draws upon his score for a film about Elizabeth I. Reigning over this performance of the Bruch was the Norwegian violinist Vilde Frang, who despite beginning with a slightly fragile first entry (most likely nerves) gave a composed exposition of the Prelude's material. She and the BBC Philharmonic under John Størgårds brought a subtle flexibility

to the rubato that never became too extreme.

Frang's slow movement was expansively drawn – indeed, some might term it indulgent, though the musical and emotional arch was adroitly shaped. Her account was most remarkable for the way she projected the most breathtaking of pianissimos into the distant reaches of this vast hall – no doubt helped by the tonal confidence she gained from her 1709 'Engleman' Stradivari.

She made up for the languor of the Adagio with a finale that was taken at a great lick, combining levity with playing that always remained rhythmically taut, characteristics that equally marked Størgårds's direction of the richly colourful orchestra.

MATTHEW RYE

**Arto Noras, Leonard Elschenbroich, Daniel Müller-Schott (cellos) Royal Philharmonic Orchestra/Charles Dutoit**

ROYAL ALBERT HALL 15 AUGUST 2013

Under the meticulous guidance of Charles Dutoit, the Royal Philharmonic was on impressive form, both intricate and virtuosic, in two impressionist mainstays – Debussy's *La mer* and Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé*. Penderecki's three-cello Concerto grosso, which preceded these works, was an altogether different beast, however. Superficially, it nodded to the Baroque form, although Penderecki proved surprisingly unimaginative in handling his forces, often reverting to consecutive phrases 'ghosted' by each soloist.

The six movements (played continuously) missed any build-up of interesting chords between the soloists or more sophisticated contrapuntal complexity. Moreover, the accessible if morosely grey material was stretched rather thinly over the piece's length. The soloists, however, were magnificent and gave their every ounce of energy and verve to the score. Even within their fine playing, they retained strongly distinctive qualities, Elschenbroich theatrical, Müller-Schott eloquently lyrical, Noras searingly commanding. It was quite a line-up of wood, too, including two Gofrillers, yet even the combined forces of great soloists and instruments could not rescue this from ultimately being a disappointing work.

JOANNE TALBOT

**EDINBURGH**

**David Kettle selects the string highlights from the Scottish capital's International Festival and Fringe**

In among the stand-up comedy, experimental theatre and zany street entertainment, the August festivals that

sweep through Edinburgh offer plenty for string lovers in their classical music events. This year, chamber music emerged as a strong string theme – quartets in particular.

It was a shame, though, that the Edinburgh International Festival's first string chamber offering, from the **Chiaroscuro Quartet** in the Queen's Hall (12 August), proved rather disappointing. This is the period

instrument foursome led (with vigour) by Alina Ibragimova, and its programme of Mozart and Schubert was lively at times, but rather po-faced at others. The players set out their clipped, non-vibrato, cleanly articulated style in the early Mozart Quartet K168 that opened the concert, but there was little sparkle or fun in their playing, even in the celebratory finale.

They brought a perceptive clarity to the larger structures of the same composer's later E flat major Quartet K428, but tone was too often on the scratchy side – in the arpeggio outbursts of the first movement's development, for instance, or in the final movement's fast figurations. Elsewhere, some passages seemed over-studied, held in too tight control to feel truly inspired. Things improved noticeably, though, in the quartet's glowing account of the Schubert 'Rosamunde' Quartet, D804, which finished the programme – it was a fiery performance full of contrasts that still let the music's simple beauty shine through.

**AT THE FESTIVAL FRINGE**, the Royal Over-Seas League returned for a typically busy – and valuable – programme promoting emerging young musicians. New Zealand's **Rothko Quartet** gave an early-morning recital of Haydn and Beethoven (14 August), and its full sound and bouncing energy made quite a contrast with the Chiaroscuro's coolness. A lot of thought had gone into the group's accounts: in the famous slow movement of the Haydn 'Emperor' Quartet, for example, the players displayed a striking flexibility of vibrato and tonal warmth, and the finale of Beethoven's Quartet op.18 no.2 bubbled with an infectious sense of fun – even if it was taken at a breakneck speed.

Staying on the Fringe, local band the **Astrid Quartet**, based in Glasgow, undertook an ambitious quintet series in Greyfriars Kirk, with cello, clarinet, double bass and piano (respectively) joining them in Schubert, Brahms, Dvořák and Elgar. Most intriguing, though, was the 14 August concert, when the quartet was joined by the Royal Scottish National Orchestra's charismatic principal trombonist Dávrur Juul Magnussen in two new pieces by Glasgow-based composers, for the unlikely but – as it turned out – entirely convincing combination of trombone and string quartet. Richard Greer's moving *Run Away* melded the quintet's contrasting sounds beautifully, its rippling textures and fragile, otherworldly sounds playing to Magnussen and the quartet players' natural sense of drama. There was remarkable ensemble in the piece's swelling chords, and a sure sense of pacing in its gradually darkening harmonies – and the piece's desolate conclusion, delivered with admirable restraint, was unforgettable. Claire McCue's *After the Before* had more rhythmic bite and urgency, with Magnussen supplying some intensely characterful playing in the final movement's assertive melodies, and the Astrid players tackling the composer's demanding writing with poise and sincerity.

It was only a short concert, but it was an unexpected delight, and a festival highlight.

Back at the International Festival, the Chamber Orchestra of Europe took up residence in the Usher Hall for two evenings under the ebullient conductor Yannick Nézet-Séguin, and on 18 August concertmaster **Lorenza Borrani** and principal viola **Pascal Siffert** stepped out from the orchestral ranks as soloists in Mozart's Sinfonia concertante K364. It was an impeccably stylish account, full of vim and sophistication, yet the two soloists' sounds couldn't have been more different: Borrani's was bright to the point of shrillness, while Siffert's was rich, burnished and rounded. It made for perplexing listening, but there was no doubting the easy charm of their blithely lyrical playing – as they dovetailed effortlessly in the first-movement cadenza, for example, or in their rhapsodic delivery of the slow movement's boundless melodies. Both soloists were hugely nuanced in their playing – tiny details conveyed a wealth of unexpected meaning – and Nézet-Séguin drew a spirited reading from the orchestra, which he continued

after the interval in an energetic account of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony.

Finally, back on the Fringe at the Royal Over-Seas League, a late-night concert (20 August) brought together two exciting young ensembles and two 20th-century classics. London-based group the **Busch Ensemble** gave a passionate performance of the Ravel Piano Trio, beautifully articulated and forcefully conveyed, although the players seemed happier dealing with bright, primary colours rather than the subtler pastel hues that the music surely needs. Afterwards, though, came a blistering account of Shostakovich's Eighth Quartet from the **Cavaleri Quartet**. Frighteningly intense and unapologetically serious in its searing slow movements, yet powered by manic energy in its furious fast movements, it was delivered with clear intention and breathtaking belief. How the Cavaleri players could maintain such seething energy at 11.30pm was hard to understand, but by the time the sobbing melodies of the work's final movement wound down in darkening despair, the foursome had delivered one of the festival's most striking performances this year.

