

20 May 2006

Would that some other Oxford orchestras were as imaginative in their programming.

For its latest concert, the Oxford Sinfonia had the brilliant idea of splitting itself into three sections - brass, wind, strings - then finding music that challenged and exploited each of the three groups. The choice of composers was imaginative too, with each being a master at writing for the instruments concerned.

Early in his career, Northampton born Sir Malcolm Arnold captured the post of principal trumpet in the London Philharmonic Orchestra - just the right credentials for the composer of a brass quintet. Arnold's op. 73 quintet opened this concert: its sunny opening Allegro vivace is maddening, for it has been used as a radio signature tune somewhere along the way - I still hadn't placed the programme involved when the Sinfonia's brass players moved on to the much more dissonant and disturbing Chaconne. The piece was played with commitment, and made me wonder, yet again, why Arnold's music isn't better known.

Next, two contrasting wind pieces. Enescu's Dixtuor (op. 14) is scored for pairs of clarinets, flutes, and bassoons, plus a single oboe and cor anglais, a combination that produces quite a nasal tone colour. It's a foolhardy reviewer who criticises a performance of a work he has never heard before, but I began to feel that conductor Hugh Brunt could have been a little less rigid in some of his tempi. Then the band burst out into a beautifully played burst of spontaneous bird-song in the central Vivement section, thoroughly putting me in my place.

The second wind piece was Mozart's Divertimento No. 3, which was played with just the right lightness of touch.

Finally, it was the turn of the Sinfonia's string players. As they launched into Strauss's Metamorphosen, for the first time I wondered if the orchestra had bitten off more than it could chew. But conductor Tom Morter soon brought out the full colour and sweep of the music, ending the concert with a superbly executed account of the work's chilling, die-away conclusion.

Giles Woodforde, Oxford Times, May 26 2006