

Saturday 26 April 2008 St Mary's Church, Oxford

Oxford Sinfonia Wind Ensemble

Conductor, Guy Woolfenden

It was a triple pleasure to hear the Oxford Sinfonia Wind Ensemble concert: for the excellence of their performance, for the opportunity to hear little-known works and, not least, for the world premiere of Guy Woolfenden's Reflections for wind decet.

Thousands of Harmoniemusik works Guy Woolfenden from the central European classical tradition have come down to us. This tradition began with oboe/bassoon bands entertaining diners at court in the early eighteenth century, and expanded into the classical octet (pairs of oboes, clarinets, bassoons and horns) as we heard to great effect in the Hummel Octet in Eb. Although Hummel, Mozart, Beethoven and others later composed directly for the Harmonie, most of the music was initially arrangements of popular operas or symphonies.

It was appropriate that this programme contained some modern arrangements, one of a Haydn Notturmo by Derek Smith, and the other of an organ concerto by Antonio Soler, in an effective antiphonal arrangement by Guy Woolfenden. These arrangements, and Guy Woolfenden's own compositions, allowed flutes to participate. This was often not the case in the classical period, but a single flute was used in the ever-popular Gounod Petite Symphonie, commissioned by the nineteenth-century Parisian flautist Paul Taffanel. The Sinfonia's lead flautist, Chris Britton, rose splendidly to its near-concerto style.

Guy Woolfenden composed over 150 scores in his 37-year tenure as Head of Music at the Royal Shakespeare Company, and is known internationally for his compositions for wind ensembles of all sizes. The Oxford Sinfonia has rendered a valuable service to wind players everywhere by commissioning his attractive new work Reflections: Serenade No.2 for wind decet. Two lively and energetic movements surround a reflective Andante espressivo written in memory of Guy's friend, the great English bassoonist William Waterhouse, who died last year. Appropriately, this movement begins and ends with an elegaic bassoon solo, played with style and skill by Simon Payne, the Sinfonia's chairman. This work will quickly enter the repertoire, joining pieces such as Woolfenden's attractive Suite Francaise, based on music originally written for Love's Labours Lost at the RSC.

The concluding piece was the Strauss Serenade Op.7 for the full wind decet. This was the work that drew the attention of Hans von Bulow to the seventeen-year-old Strauss and launched his career as both conductor and composer. The balanced and fluent ensemble of the Sinfonia did full justice to the romantic, lyrical lines, the varied instrumental colouring and the detailed rhythmic and harmonic support.

This delightful concert in the excellent acoustic of St. Mary's, displayed the musicality and skill of the Oxford Sinfonia Wind Ensemble to full effect and showed the variety and depth of the repertoire for this genre.

Keith Bowen