

of the group carefully passing forward a baton of great value and incredible fragility, like a single thought, haltingly expressed (with occasional abrupt interruptions).

With its eerie music-box melodies and brittle squeaks eked from the rims of wine glasses, Clara Iannotta's *Eclipse Plumage* would not have sounded out of place in a haunted house. The whole piece was full of creaks and wails and things going bump in the night. Composed around an ensemble of strings, flute, clarinet and piano with something called an 'antimachine' – a jury-rigged contraption which used a kind of a spooky action-at-a-distance to set the piano strings buzzing. There was a whole host of other little devices and bits and bobs on stage too. It looked rather more like a carpenter's workshop than a concert. That didn't make the piece any less creepily effective.

Rebecca Saunders' *Dust II* was about as grand and spectacular as you can get with just two percussionists in matching blue shirts. There were a good half-dozen timpani, on and off the stage, several huge bass drums, a whole smorgasbord of other bells and triangles and metal sheets. But the moment that got to me was one of the smallest, simplest gestures in it. It came quite near the beginning, as the two players made their gradual way from the auditorium to the stage. One stopped to activate a large lampshade-sized singing bowl with a softly howling thrum. Once he walked off to mount the stage, the other player then approached the bowl holding a snare drum, allowing the resonance from the former to animate the drum's rattles with a gentle rush of white noise. It was only a small thing, quickly dwarfed by the bravura of the rest of the piece. But it spoke of a certain snatched intimacy, like waking up after your partner has left for work but finding the toilet seat still warm – a little gentle magic in a piece which sometimes left its two performers looking like they were beaver away in their own little worlds.

A full evening of orchestral commissions on the Saturday night, opened with most of the LCMF Orchestra already in place but a few seats onstage still empty. Those missing players soon emerged in procession, passing through the aisle, tossing coffee grounds left and right as they went, like a bishop with a censer. Such was Ben Patterson's (1964) First Symphony. Led to expect a rich aural experience, we got an olfactory one in its place. The smell of coffee hung in the air for the rest of the evening. But few of the Orchestra's own commissions quite hit the spot, with the musicians in works by Elvin Brandhi and Cerith Wyn Evans seemingly left to do

whatever they felt like, while the two composers either noodled about with a big gong (Evans) or stalked the back of the room yelping and screeching (Brandhi). The exceptions were Oliver Leith's smudged take on grand martial music, *Pearly, goldy, woody, bloody, or, Abundance*, with its microtonal fuzziness and ironic gunshots (a nod, presumably, to the building's history) and Mariam Rezaei's astonishingly virtuosic turn behind the decks for her new work, *SADTITZZZ*, a piece which built a sort of glitchy, twitchy take on Rimsky-Korsakov's Flight of the Bumblebee out of just a few furiously crab-scratched orchestral samples.

It was an elegiac close to the festival on Sunday night, as we all wandered down to the riverfront for Tom Foulsham's *Bb Arrangement for 3 Musicians and 1300 Meters*. The sun was setting beneath the clouds, casting a purple hue upon the Thames, where just a few metres out from the south bank three small dinghies bobbed gently on the water. On each boat was a brass player (trumpeters Christopher Vickers and Dylan Kirk plus trombonist Michael Tasker), each with a specially adapted instrument that lit up concentric halos of light around the bell when played. Together, in tight synchrony, they played a single triad chord. Then the boats drifted off in different directions, pulling further and further apart, with one of them getting halfway to Canary Wharf. At intervals, as they parted, they played the same chord again – the lights signalling their continued simultaneity even as the sound we heard became increasingly broken and staggered. It's a neat image to bookend a two-year period during which the apparent simultaneity of light-speed communications couldn't mask our ever widening apartness.

Robert Barry

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Oliver Knussen Day, Britten Studio, Snape Maltings

A trill sends a barely audible note spluttering into life, forming snatched phrases that evolve into a lyrical melody. Violinist Tamsin Waley-Cohen coaxes rainbow colours from the upper-octave section; it's so compelling that it takes a moment to notice the piano has begun its fragmented commentary – an unassuming entry that echoes the violin's own juddery beginnings. *Reflection*, op. 31a, may have been selected for its editorial connotations – the piece opens Aldeburgh

Festival's Oliver Knussen Day, three recitals dedicated to the composer-conductor who passed away in 2018 – but its title isn't an evocative musing, so much a description of the compositional device. Pianist Huw Watkins repeats and refracts Waley-Cohen's expressions, until the two eventually meet, aligning in a final flourish.

The eight-minute work is one of the longest pieces featured in this morning recital, which includes just one other work by Knussen – *Ophelia's Last Dance*, op. 32, a gentle, dream-like waltz for solo piano that's increasingly been taken up by pianists since Kirill Gerstein included it on his recording of Liszt's Dante sonata with Schumann's *Humoreske* (Myrios Classics, MYR005). A substantial work packed with filigree melodies and taking a quasi-impressionistic style, it focuses on the resonant, mid-range of the piano. (The thematic material stems from discarded sketches for Knussen's Third Symphony, which, in a different guise, would also be used in the ensemble piece *Ophelia Dances*, Book 1.) It is exquisitely crafted, economical but never austere, whispering its secrets into the Britten Studio.

Knussen – artistic director of Aldeburgh Festival from 1983 to 1998, a resident of Snape and regular fixture on festival programmes – was a collaborative colleague. Many of the composers he worked with were featured throughout the day, with several in attendance. One of these was Tansy Davies, who was among the audience to hear the premiere of *gem* (2022), a compact and engaging piece for solo cello, one of 13 played by the intrepid Anssi Karttunen. Colin Matthews was present for the first UK performance of 2020's *Three Fragments*, also for solo cello, which mixed elegiac writing with an unbuttoned dance-like movement.

Other short musical tributes included Hans Werner Henze's *Olly on the shore* (2001) – a play on the folk song *Molly on the shore* and a nod to Knussen's life on the Suffolk coast; Esa-Pekka Salonen's 2022 *Arabesques for Olly*; Detlev Glanert's *Little Letter to Olly* (2021); and Julian Anderson's *Maisema* (2019) – the latter three being premieres. Morning turned to afternoon with selection of songs by Mussorgsky, performed by soprano Claire Booth and pianist Christopher Glynn. On the face of it, the sound-worlds of nineteenth-century Russian villages and the English coast circa today have little in common. But the influence of Mussorgsky is felt throughout Knussen's oeuvre, from the bells in his opera *The Nursery* (a reference to *Boris Godunov*) to *Cleveland Pictures*, op. 31, from which clear parallels can be drawn with *Pictures at an Exhibition* (both of which were

performed in the evening concert; see below). We emerge from the studio, blinking into brightness.

The second two recitals followed a virtually identical format: a couple of pieces by Knussen himself, alongside dedications and the odd historic work. It was interesting to hear Knussen's one-minute tarantella written for Kaija Saariaho's 50th birthday – which uses the cipher SAARiAHO (Eb–A–A–D–A–B \sharp) – alongside Saariaho's own musical message, a lullaby composed shortly after Knussen's death. Both were played by Karttunen, who had delivered the original birthday message back in 2002. The cellist had a demanding role throughout the day, with the majority of pieces scored with him in mind (such as Brad Lubman's *For Anssi for OK*). This, combined with the number of mentees featured, created an often homogenous soundscape – a School of Knussen. Former students, such as Mark-Anthony Turnage, whose 2020 piece *Song for Big Owl: 66 Bars in Memory of Oliver Knussen* was premiered, joined the growing audience. But there was always going to be an element of hagiography to such an occasion, the first opportunity since the pandemic that Aldeburgh Festival had to commemorate one of its own. Knussen might not have the same level of notoriety as some of his contemporaries, but at Snape he garnered respect that bordered on reverence. I recall walking into the Plough and Sail after a Saturday morning recital. Our entire party fell silent as we registered Knussen enjoying refreshment with the festival's then artistic director Pierre-Laurent Aimard and Tamara Stefanovich. Dutch courage secured, compliments were paid and humbly received – the cult surrounding the composer-conductor was simply that.

Zoë Martlew's *O-lude* provided a welcome change in style. Scored for cello (again) and electronics, it featured some very personal sounds – Karttunen pulled the ring on a can of Diet Coke, Knussen's chosen poison, from a bag emblazoned with a picture of an owl, and took a dramatic slurp. It injected a moment of poignant humour before the concluding piece, Knussen's *Secret Psalm*, originally written for the memorial concert for Michael Vyner, artistic director of the London Sinfonietta, a still meditation on life and art.

The BBC Symphony Orchestra and Ryan Wigglesworth provided a dazzling addendum to the day over in the Snape Maltings concert hall with the first public performance of *Cleveland Pictures* (2003–08), an unfinished work that depicts pieces from the collection of the Cleveland Museum of Art. Four (nos 1, 2, 4 and 5) are complete, while the others are significant fragments.

The 16-minute work was repeated during the concert, one of Knussen's own programming techniques. It was played alongside the 1994 horn concerto and Mussorgsky's *A Night on Bare Mountain* and *Pictures at an Exhibition*, a dramatic

and fitting testament to two composers lost too soon.

Claire Jackson

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