

Encore Primavera! ¹⁹

BARN CONCERT, UPDOWN FARM, BETTESHANGER

It is one thing to think oneself thoroughly familiar with musical masterpieces via tapes or discs or radio or T.V.; it is an experience of a very different order to hear them re-created in the flesh at a live concert. This is a commonplace of musical appreciation but commonplaces come to life when one is confronted again with an exceptionally vivid reminder. It happened at our Primavera concert in the Stone Hall on April 21st last and it happened again on Sunday June 17th when Primavera returned (after a year) to Updown Farm.

The Barn itself, available again by the kind courtesy of Mr & Mrs Michael Willis-Fleming an re-restored after recent hurricane damage, offers a resolutely plain venue in the midst of an unpretentiously beautiful garden but it is welcoming with something of farmhouse homeliness, well-matched indeed to the atmosphere and ambience of a chamber concert.

"Chamber" music has acquired unfortunate but unfair overtones of dullness and inaccessibility but it means only "small": music composed for small groups (or individuals) to play and hear in small, indeed domestic, rooms. There are, of course, difficult composers (in large as well as small compositions) but neither Mozart at his most genial and lyrical best nor Brahms, in his late autumnal richness, are in that category. If we regard their clarinet quintets as concertos for small groups (just as string quartets are symphonies for small string orchestras) we may remove an unnecessary barrier to enjoyment.

In less than four years Primavera has established a very marked if not unique capacity to involve its listeners in the music. They are, of course, all of them distinguished professionals and would command respect for the technical distinction of their playing; but whereas some professionals (*not necessarily improperly) maintain aloofness and social distance from their patrons or clients, Paul Manley and his colleagues make it plain as they enter the auditorium by their very gait and their smiles that they have come joyfully to share an important experience with their audience. Their exchanges of glances between each and every one of them bespeak deep and well-founded friendliness as well as musical necessity so that their attack, when it comes, and their entries are warm as well as precise; they resume the work they have so meticulously rehearsed with the added fervour of communicating with more friends. There must be a leader and that leader is obviously Paul Manley but he is first only amongst equals.

20 The physical mannerisms of musicians are a part of the performance and sometimes, unfortunately, they get in the way, either by being too wooden or too demonstrative: I could name names! With Primavera they are an asset. The music is mirrored in their faces and their movements as well as in the notes. They clearly feel as well as play the music and their nuances of movement, tiny as well as vigorous, underline the nuances of the music. It communicates as genuine and spontaneous, not forced: and the sequence of masterpieces (nothing less) they choose to build into their programmes is discrimination personified.

Although it is unusual, their decision to play both the Mozart and Brahms Clarinet Quintets in one concert was inspired. Both brilliantly exploit all the resources of the instrument but both use them not for virtuoso display (though they were writing for particular virtuosos) but because their music integrally demands it. Angela Malsbury is less demonstrative than her fellow musicians but her performance, especially in the Mozart and most especially in the slow movement, was rapt in its intensity. Necessary agilities were brilliantly executed but it was the feeling in quiet passages which was most moving and it was her stillness at the end of each of the movements at the end of the two works which commanded the audience's own stillness for long seconds before they applauded which was the measure of their just appreciation. It is said that musicians have failed if the applause at the end of a piece is immediate. There could be no greater testimony to the near perfection of Primavera than the hush which greeted their concluding silences. I do not myself recall ever having been more moved in seventy years of listening.

What to play between two masterpieces by two composers of the first rank? The Dvorak Terzetto was the unfamiliar but aptest conceivable answer. Trios for two violins and a viola must be few and kit sounds an unlikely combination: all top and very little bottom. In fact it is both perfectly contrasted and perfectly balanced and has the particular virtue of allowing that most modest of instruments, the viola, to shine, to show that, undrowned by the cello, it has its own unique and distinctive timbre and power, as Matthew Soutar obviously delighted to show. It also allowed us to see that Catherine Hart, the second violinist, is also a virtuoso. As when they played the Bartok Divertimento in the Stone Hall, the trio performed this work standing up and it was again amazing to feel the difference of power and attack. There is nothing small about the Terzetto. Its four movements have all the contrast and harmony of a suite if not of a symphony and Dvorak could not help writing both spritely and solemn tunes with all his characteristic Bohemian drive and variety of rhythmic invention and orchestration.

The conclusion is, I trust, obvious. We must have Primavera, ideally with wind as well as strings back in the Town Hall as soon as possible. Thanks to our generous sponsors we can negotiate a date with them, confident that our members and friends will wish to re-savour an unmatched musical experience.

JACK WOOLFORD