

CONCERTS AT DUNSTER AND DULVERTON

The orchestral series of the 45th Minehead and Exmoor Festival began at St George's Church, Dunster on Monday 28th July with an air of expectancy.

The programme included the first performance of Yorkshire-born Timothy Salter's Concerto for Alto Saxophone. Commissioned (with funds from the RVW Trust) by soloist Amy Dickson, this work was, after composition, entitled 'Chameleon'.

Of about 20 minutes' duration, it is scored for a small string orchestra and a single percussionist in charge of a range of instruments, the composer's own programme note explaining that this combination, unlike the classical relationship between solo and orchestra, accompanied the distinctive sounds and characteristics of the saxophone which, ever-changing throughout the piece, gave the idea of the tide. The four movements are marked 'Agitated' (intense, almost menacing, rhythms); 'Fleeting' (fleet-of-foot rather than brief, concluding gently as if on the wind); 'Gently Flowing' (beautiful solo passages rising and falling against held strings, with a magical ending); and 'Forceful' (some bi-play between saxophone and strings with regular interruptions from percussion).

Amy Dickson, in full command of both instrument and concerto, admirably demonstrated the qualities of the instrument as the composer intended including some remarkable sustained pianissimo notes in the upper register and

the forceful nature of low notes in the agitato passages. Under Richard Dickins' firm direction, the orchestra addressed well the challenging score and unusual time signatures and percussionist Vivianne Child was kept busy amongst her instruments.

Chameleon was sandwiched, very effectively, between two symphonies, the classical 'Linz' by Mozart and the early romantic 'Italian' of Mendelssohn, both well-established in symphonic repertoire. The 'Linz' dates from 1783 having been somewhat hurriedly written to satisfy the needs of Mozart's host in that town whilst Mendelssohn's 'Italian', composed to a London Philharmonic Society commission in 1833, was first performed in London though conceived during a visit to Italy and drawing on the rhythms and traditions of that country.

After a little tenseness in the Mozart, and any 'first-night nerves' of Chameleon behind them, the orchestra were more relaxed and the final saltarello tarantella of the 'Italian' fairly danced along.

The programme was repeated the following evening at All Saints' Church, Dulverton, all three pieces benefiting from the crisper acoustic there, and it was further enhanced as Timothy Salter introduced his own piece, amplifying his thinking behind its structure.

Appreciative audiences at both venues left agreeably satisfied with their evening's entertainment.

RAG

OUTSTANDING FIRST REGAL CONCERT

THE first of the Festival Orchestra's Regal concerts was given to a packed audience on Thursday July 31.

Under the familiar baton of Richard Dickins and with the reassuring presence of Maya Magub as leader, the orchestra achieved a resounding success.

The programme opened with the Helios Overture by the Danish composer Carl Nielsen who died in 1931 and whose works were first championed in Britain only in the 1950s. This overture, inspired in 1903 by his visit to the Mediterranean, graphically depicts the sun's passage across the heavens from dawn to dusk. Throbbing lower strings softly begin the piece; horn calls greet the rising sun.

A later passage for full orchestra conveys a hint of Nielsen's unmistakably distinctive sound world. As the sun sinks into the Aegean the overture ends as it began.

This interesting overture led on to a major Nordic masterpiece. Like Nielsen, Sibelius was born in 1865 and began composing his Violin Concerto in 1903. Its formidable demands puts it among the most challenging of concertos, and the accomplished performance by soloist Corina Belcea-Fisher was truly world class.

Romanian-born, but a graduate of the Menuhin School and the Royal College of Music, Corina Belcea-Fisher is now among the first rank of violinists both as soloist and as leader of the distinguished quartet which bears her name. Her technical mastery was matched by an infallible musicianship that took full advantage of the magnificent tone of her

Stradivarius instrument.

The rapport between conductor and soloist was remarkable and produced an unforgettable performance that won prolonged applause from an ecstatic audience.

After the interval came the warmth of Brahms' 2nd Symphony: happy music with occasional hints of menace and melancholy. The first movement, with its second subject heard first on the cellos, is developed with full orchestral passages interspersed with horn and woodwind solos.

The slow movement begins with a grave descending melody featuring lower strings; later there are tranquil passages of piercing beauty. A lilting oboe tune introduces the graceful dancing third movement and, after a quiet opening, there follows the confident themes of the last movement which ends with a triumphant conclusion.

Richard Dickins had inspired his expert players to their customary high level of performance. It was a grand night for all the orchestra, particularly for the cellos and the horns.

The complete string band produced a rich, disciplined sound. Woodwind and brass distinguished themselves, with fine solo playing.

It was a great night for the audience, too, who left the Regal knowing that the festival's fine standards had been maintained or enhanced by this outstanding concert.

DHG

RAPTUROUS OVATION FROM ENTHRALLED AUDIENCE

THE final concert in the 45th Minehead and Exmoor Festival was apparently the first pre-sold out concert in the festival's long and distinguished history.

The Festival Orchestra, conductor, audience and all those involved should rightly congratulate themselves on the support they have given, and continue to give, to this week of high quality music making.

The Concert began in sparkling style with the overture from arguably the most popular of Czech operas, Smetana's *The Bartered Bride*. Richard Dickins set the tone with his exuberant conducting and the orchestra responded with a busy, buzzing performance which captured the joie de vivre of Smetana's work.

Suzie Thorn, who is a Royal Philharmonic Society 'Young Artist', then joined the orchestra for one of Richard Strauss' late works, the highly inventive Oboe Concerto.

The piece makes serious demands on both the stamina and finger technique of the soloist as Strauss links the three traditional movements of the standard concerto to form a lyrical whole. Suzie Thorn coped admirably with the challenges to give an assured performance of this happy inspiration of Strauss' old age.

The Russian conductor Valery Gergiev once said of conducting Tchaikovsky's 5th Symphony: "When I come to terms with this symphony, I sometimes feel it's not with my brain but with my biological system, with my physical energy", and this visceral excitement was apparent in the thrilling rendition of the piece with which the Festival Orchestra ended the season.

The performance was bursting at the seams with passion and vitality and also demonstrated the warm and sympathetic understanding between orchestra and conductor. There was some superb playing from the soloists - with the horn and bassoon deserving of special mention - but there was also lovely overall weight of string tone and incisive attack from the brass section.

The invigorating first movement was followed by a spacious account of the slow movement with its powerful interruptions of the fateful motto theme. The third movement waltz provided an elegant interlude before the dramatic and thrilling finale brought a rapturous ovation from the enthralled audience.

The Minehead and Exmoor Festival is an extraordinary achievement of, wonderful music making. long may it continue to flourish.

EF