

Little and Large

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Dubbed one of the music world's best-kept secrets, Little Missenden Festival has been running for 57 years, and there is nothing little about its ambition, says Andrew Green

In late 1959, Pat Harrison, a music teacher from the charming Chilterns village of Little Missenden (destined to be a prime Midsomer Murders location), was driving her house-guest – a young cellist, Rohan de Saram – back to Oxford. 'I chanced to mention how wonderful it would be for the medieval church of Little Missenden to have a festival of new English music,' de Saram recalls. 'Pat took my remark seriously. To my surprise and delight, 1960 saw the launch of the festival.'

Pat Harrison's legacy (she died in 1998 at the age of 92) continues to thrive. The yearly event revolves largely around the exquisite Saxon-founded Church of St John the Baptist – still with contemporary music (including first performances this year of works by Rob Keeley and Elo Masing) a significant part of the mix. It may be the oldest completely volunteer-run arts festival in the UK. More to the point, it remains a beacon for how artistic ambition and imagination need not be thwarted by slender resources. This is a modest-sized event with the biggest of hearts. Over the past 57 years it has attracted creative artists (from various disciplines) of the stature of Janet Baker, Ted Hughes, John Tavener, Louis MacNeice, Michael Tippett and Henry Moore to what clueless townies might dub a Buckinghamshire backwater. This year's most notable coup is the engaging of best-selling novelist Rose Tremain to give a rare lecture.

So how does the festival's famously eclectic mix find its way on to the drawing board? The best person to answer that is the chairman of the event's programme committee, 77-year-old former social researcher Alan Hedges. 'Well, we don't start off by saying, "What will sell tickets?"' he huffs politely. 'And we're certainly not interested in putting on any concert whose purpose is to promote a CD.'

So there. Programmes often 'emerge' via a combination of the germ of an idea and an ongoing discussion with performers to put flesh on the bones. For example, this

year's concert from the Octandre Ensemble began with its suggestion that Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* should form the centrepiece. 'We then collaborated with Octandre to build the programme around that,' Hedges explains. 'Just over 100 years after the Schoenberg was written, it's appropriate to have Mark Simpson's brand-new *Hommage à Kurtág*. That work then links to Kurtág's *Hommage à Robert Schumann*. So it's logical then to have a work by Schumann, his *Märchenerzählungen*. People often say that they've trusted us to deliver something familiar, so they'll also trust us with something more adventurous.'

It is a return visit from Octandre and conductor Jon Hargreaves, who has been 'amazed to find this rich tapestry of diverse programming at a gorgeous medieval church in such a small village. We very much value the interactive approach to programming which means our concert this year is completely bespoke.'

Other 2016 performers include Melvyn Tan playing Beethoven, Liszt and a new Jonathan Dove work, *Catching Fire*; Gesualdo Six with a host of Italian madrigals; and the Ligeti Quartet delivering an intriguing mix of John Adams, Schnittke, Barber, John Zorn, Duke Ellington and Shostakovich. By a happy chance the quartet (making its second visit to the festival) includes Rohan de Saram's niece, violinist Mandhira de Saram. 'We're not used to such a welcoming attitude to the idea of scheduling the 20th- and 21st-century repertoire we perform,' she says. 'I remember one piece we played last time being an especially tough listen for audience members, but afterwards they were more than happy to talk about it, which was a refreshing experience.'

St John the Baptist church is famed for its wall paintings, including the 13th-century fresco of St Christopher which is the festival's symbol. It is not a large venue and the sight-lines aren't always ideal, admits one of the dozens of festival volunteers, Ed McKeon, 'but it has an incredible atmosphere. Audiences respond to this with concentration and care, which makes a great experience for musicians and keeps everyone on their toes.'

Locals like McKeon throw themselves into each event. He reckons it must be highly unusual for a festival of 'such range, ambition and sense of adventure' to be run

solely by volunteers. This feeds through, he says 'into the sense of community the festival produces'.

'Some of the volunteers pay over the odds with their concert subscriptions,' says Alan Hedges. 'This enables us to build a financial cushion that along with the grant money we receive enables us to do more adventurous things. We're not dependent on selling every seat.' Volunteers may put in the hard yards as committee members or simply do their bit by picking up artists from the station and providing a meal. The Red Lion pub does its bit as well, erecting a refreshment marquee during the festival to compensate for the lack of facilities at the church.

All in all, the event reflects the unique magic of this part of the world, says Ed McKeon. 'The village is close to London, yet it's a world apart. Its two pubs, village hall and church are all located on one street, which has barely any lamp-posts let alone other facilities. But Little Missenden isn't inward-looking. It welcomes visitors with its character and setting.'

With the 2016 festival about to get under way, Rohan de Saram expresses his 'great delight that the festival continues to thrive to this day. I'm delighted to have been one of the sparks that ignited the flame.'

www.little-missenden.org/