

Berkeley Ensemble

Francesca Barritt, violin, Amalia Young, violin, Dan Shilladay, violin
Gemma Wareham, cello, Martin Ludenbach, double bass
Jonathan Parkin, clarinet, Andrew Watson, bassoon, David Horwich, horn

15-16 November 2024

Bridport Arts Centre, Ilminster Arts Centre, The Dance House, Crewkerne

For its final concert mini-tour of 2024 Concerts in the West hosted the eight strong group of players from The Berkeley Ensemble. Consisting of five strings, clarinet, bassoon, and horn, the two octet works of Franz Schubert and Howard Ferguson were central to the programme. Although written over one hundred apart – Schubert’s in 1824 and Ferguson’s in 1933 - they are in some ways similar. The instrumentation is the same; both works have inspired clarinet parts exploiting the instruments range of tone-colour and requiring an accomplished player to deliver the natural lyricism and agility of the instrument. In other ways the octets are quite different. Schubert’s is the longer work with greater changes of tempo in its six movements and testing the group’s stamina and concentration, while the Ferguson is much more direct and at times very exacting on individual prowess. Structurally the latter uses clarinet-led material in various guises throughout as a kind of linking-chain. In Jonathan Parkin, the Berkeley Ensemble had a clarinettist of real quality, showing character and energy when its was appropriate. In bassoonist, Andrew Watson and horn player, David Horwich the wind trio of the octets had a solid and reliable group. Given its period of conception, it is perhaps not surprising that the Schubert Octet has a feeling of a scaled-down late Classical symphony where the strings work more homogeneously. The Howard Ferguson Octet on the other hand, allows the instruments more individual freedom to state their presence.

In the string quintet arrangement of a selection of Mussorgsky’s Pictures at an Exhibition challenge our memories of Ravel’s colourful orchestration and perhaps even Mussorgsky’s own piano suite. Memory derived expectations could possibly leave the listener feeling ‘short-changed’. However, any reservations the audiences may have had were set aside by very accomplished string playing led by the violinist, Francesca Barritt.

By and large Concerts in the West tour with much smaller groups of musicians or soloists. With the eight members of the Berkeley Ensemble, this finale was an inspired choice in bringing down the curtain on the nineteenth consecutive season of Concerts in the West, and a suitable precursor to the twentieth series of concerts starting in February 2025.

Andrew Maddocks 2024