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St Magnus Festival, Orkney

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A new piece by Peter Maxwell Davies was one of the highlights of the opening weekend.

The premiere performance of a work by the composer with whom the festival is inextricably linked is always an event; this piece seemed especially significant, despite its brevity.

Proverb for string orchestra and chorus was written as a farewell for retiring festival director Glenys Hughes, whose association with St Magnus stretches back over several decades. The text, an obscure Latin inscription taken from a 13th-century castle in Syria cautioning of the dangers of pride, is not the most obvious for a valedictory work, yet from this Max has crafted a gem of a miniature, barely three minutes in length, whose melodic simplicity, underpinned by the rocking effect of the pizzicato double bass line, is effective and poignant.

Martyn Brabbins conducted the BBC SSO (this year's orchestra in residence) and the St Magnus Festival Chorus in the premiere, in a programme that opened with Britten's Four Sea Interludes from Peter Grimes and closed with Elgar's Enigma Variations, performances which showed an orchestra on fine form and a conductor with a stylish and sympathetic affinity for the music. Between these pillars of British repertoire, Max's new piece was preceded by another choral work, Poulenc's Gloria, a test of strength for the festival chorus. The non-auditioning choir might not make the most powerful sound and the pitch was a little wayward in places, but it was an impressively precise account with excellently clear diction.

Polish music and musicians of all kinds loom large in this year's programme. At one end of Sunday's schedule, formidable pianist Ewa Kupiec gave a no-holds barred performance of works by Poland's most famous composer, Chopin, alongside the Second Sonata by 20th-century Polish composer Grazyna Bacewicz, a darkly evocative, melancholy piece. In contrast to the fire of Kupiec's performance, the Royal String Quartet performed Gorecki's mesmeric Third String Quartet in an atmospheric late-night concert in St Magnus Cathedral. Played with control and sensitivity, the composer's distinctive brand of spiritual minimalism proved effective.

Alongside the classical performers and programmes, the MagFest strand of the festival offers a different take on the Polish theme. Performances included Karbido's The Table, a novel music theatre piece that made a big impression at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe several years ago, involving four performers, a multi-purpose musical table and some clever electronics. Less technologically innovative but no less impressive was the Bester Quartet,

a charismatic ensemble whose distinctive style is a fusion of Klezmer, Balkan folk and jazz.

Star rating: ****

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Bądź pierwszym znajomym, który to poleca.

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