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Polish theme adds polish to St Magnus

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By Kenneth Walton

ORKNEY's weather may be changeable, but its annual festival is as dependable as ever, filled with fine music of all kinds.



• Ewa Kupiec delighted with Chopin's Piano Concerto No 2. Picture: Complimentary

DAY ONE: FRIDAY, 18 JUNE

IT'S Friday and Kirkwall Airport looks significantly plusher than it did when I last visited the St Magnus Festival. What hasn't altered is the changeable weather – it's a chilly 10C, with ominous hovering clouds and bracing icy wind, compared with the 22C and brilliant sunshine at home. But that's Orkney for you, expect the unpredictable.

Except when it comes to the annual six-day festival, which promises all the same basic ingredients that have made it such a knock-out success since it was formed 35 years ago by its most famous protagonist, Sir Peter Maxwell Davies.

He's getting on a bit now, and walks with a wobble, but this year's programme is peppered with some of his own music: glories from the past and a new piece written to honour Glenys Hughes's final year as artistic director. But that's not till Sunday, there's much more before then – such as one of those rollicking community theatre pieces that are a perennial delight of the St Magnus.

Tonight's festival opener is an adaptation of Dylan Thomas's *The Doctor and the Devils* by Vivian Leslie, with music by Glenys Hughes's successor as festival director, the composer Alasdair Nicolson. It's about Edinburgh's gruesome twosome, Burke and Hare, and theatrically it's easy meat to the amateur thespians of Kirkwall who ham up the black humour with no wish to entertain moderation or self-restraint. They love it; so did I. Nicolson's score plays fun and games with folk tunes contemporary to the plot, but gets much more interesting when he avoids literalism to create a sinister underscore.

DAY 2: SATURDAY, 19 JUNE

This year there's a Polish theme, as St Magnus embraces the year-long UK-wide *Polska!* celebrations. Polish artists and composers are all over town. And so to Stromness Town Hall, where the Royal String Quartet (phenomenal performances of quartets by Szymanowski and Beethoven) join forces with fiery pianist Ewa Kupiec for Chopin's Piano Concerto No 2 in its reduced chamber version.

Here's an intriguingly unfamiliar angle on a work so often harangued for its inconsequential orchestral scoring. With the solo quartet out front, the balance is turned on its head, and Chopin gets a much more favourable press.

An early evening tip points me towards MagFest, a kind of alternative Spiegel Tent event in the local Jewson's storage shed, and a cracking Polish ensemble called the Bester Quartet. This lot are as phenomenal as the classical Royals, but occupy a musical genre that fuses East European Jewish music with contemporary jazz. Aleatoric madness combines with raw Balkan folk, but the virtuosity is mind-blowing.

There's Jewish music of a different kind as the Hebrides fill St Magnus Cathedral with such Viennese Secessionist curiosities as Schoenberg's chamber arrangements of Strauss waltzes and of Mahler's *Leider Eines Fahrenden Gesellen*. Swedish baritone Håkan Vramsmo appears a little lightweight in the Mahler, but hits the spot in selections from Schubert's *Winterreise*.

The nightly Festival Club swings into action with the charismatic Alastair Savage Trio, mostly members of the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, which has now arrived in Kirkwall as resident orchestra.

DAY 3: SUNDAY, 20 JUNE

It's 11am, and outside St Magnus Cathedral many are anticipating a strange premiere. Steve King, composer and Scottish Chamber Orchestra viola player, is about to perform a work specially written for Glenys Hughes – on the cathedral's bells. Working with three pitches, and ever-hopeful he won't end up dangling from the ropes, his creation rings out around Kirkwall. I liked the little Scotch snaps – assuming they were deliberate.

Possibly audible in Kirkwall, too, is Ewa Kupiec's afternoon solo recital ten miles away in Stromness – a thundering, full-on programme of mainly Chopin that puts the modest Steinway through its paces, putting paid to the oft-held opinion that Chopin's music should be treated with kid gloves. An abundance of musicality and technical brilliance offsets the power show – just.

There's time to fit in the extrovert antics of Karbido's *The Table*, four Poles around a customised "musical" table in the Jewson's shed, creating a surreal kaleidoscope of musical styles, ranging from vocalised heavy metal and echoes of Frank Zappa to something resembling extra-terrestrial Simon and Garfunkel. Wacky or what?

It's a world away from the evening's orchestral programme of Elgar and Britten under Martyn Brabbins, who conducts the well-stocked Festival Chorus in a gutsy and exciting performance of Poulenc's *Gloria*. There's a double helping of Max's *Proverb* for chorus and orchestra, a short going-away present for Glenys Hughes. Devoid of sentimentality, it draws on a short Latin verse that praises modesty and warns against conceit. As ever, Max sets it to quizzical music that rests on a doleful minor chord.

DAY 4: MONDAY, 21 JUNE

Up bright and early to deliver a breakfast festival round-up on Radio Orkney, which follows an important traffic warning: the lollipop lady is "naw weel". A lunchtime cocktail of modern works featuring the Hebrides has logistical issues as each piece requires significant restaging. It stretches beyond its hour-long slot, throwing undue emphasis on some inherent weaknesses of two Polish works: Aleksander Kosciow's overly gestural *Ore Osse Oculo*; and Pawel Mykietyn's *3 for 13*, which is an overcooked deconstruction of Bach.

Polish soprano Olga Pasichnyk appears with the BBC SSO in Lutoslawski's delicate Chantefleurs et chantefables. Conductor Michal Dworzynski lets the brass away with murder in Tchaikovsky's Symphony No 4.

Leszec Mozdar's late-night Cathedral appearance is surreal. Looking suspiciously like Gerard Depardieu in Green Card, the shaggy-haired pianist turns Chopin themes into supersonic jazz numbers. He also stuffs dusters and other objects inside the piano mid-performance, transforming it into some kind of homemade synthesiser. Amazing.

DAY 5: TUESDAY, 22 JUNE

Nicola Benedetti has still to appear, but that's it for me this year. There's time for a quick chat with Glenys Hughes' successor, Alasdair Nicolson, who says "if it ain't broke, don't fix it". Sounds to me like perfect common sense.

- The St Magnus Festival continues until tonight. www.stmagnusfestival.com

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