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BBC Concert Orchestra/Lloyd-Jones at Dorchester Abbey

Few festivals could be farther from the cutting edge as the English Music Festival, but this event was full of novelties

Geoff Brown



On stage at Radley College, the Bridge String Quartet was manfully reviving an unpublished quartet by Alan Rawsthorne; through the hall window, against a blazing sky, a cricket match edged forward. It only needed warm beer and a bicycling spinster for John Major's England to be complete.

This was the third and most populous manifestation yet of the English Music Festival, based at the cosy nook of Dorchester on Thames. Few festivals could be farther from the cutting edge in its musical tastes, though merit and refreshment can always be found without battling through screeds of Birtwistle. Resurrecting the forgotten past is the EMF's mission, and while the real dogs should be left sleeping, no one could complain about most of the music woken up over the weekend.

The BBC Concert Orchestra's Saturday concert was full of novelties. Here was the first public performance of Delius's tone poem *Hiawatha* of 1888, a lightly exotic, congenial score, realised with passion and authority by the BBC team and its conductor, David Lloyd-Jones. But the item that stirred most curiosity was the Violin Concerto of Frederic Cliffe, a late Victorian composer briefly considered the best thing since the steam engine.

Handed a score prised from a 100-year slumber, Philippe Graffin projected the solo part with the kind of sparkle that you expect from a concerto by Brahms or Dvorák. These were clearly Cliffe's godfathers — you could tell by the harmonies, and the finale's gypsy twinkle. What Cliffe lacked was their steady inspiration. A constricted theme would flower only in its development; or a fetching melody would expand, then wilt. Yet with Cliffe's warm heart and bright orchestration it was impossible to be annoyed. This concerto may not have the legs to enter the repertory, but there's no reason why it cannot be taken for the odd walk.

It was good to hear Elgar's *Sanguine Fan*, too, (lower-drawer Elgar, but deliciously played) and Vaughan Williams's strange *Willow Wood*, sung by Jeremy Hugh Williams. And applause for Constant Lambert's Piano Sonata, music of muscle and strong personality, powerfully projected by David Owen Norris in a recital otherwise crammed with too much ingrown anguish.

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