

### Aldeburgh Festival Continues to Do the Britten/Pears Legacy Proud

By Keith Clarke, *MusicalAmerica.com*

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SNAPE, SUFFOLK, UK--In its almost seven decades, the festival set up by Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears has evolved into a year-round cultural center, training young musicians and acting as a musical catalyst in many ways. New CEO and former BBC Proms Director Roger Wright has big plans for further development of Aldeburgh Music, but the Festival remains the jewel in the crown.

The event took off in unexpected ways on June 10 with aerial acrobatics from a circus troupe enlivening a program centered on Britten's song cycle *Les Illuminations*. For director Struan Leslie, the introduction of circus skills was the perfect way to get to grips with Rimbaud's surreal poetry, steeped in dream-like images and other-worldly characters.



*A scene from Les Illuminations*

On a set in Snape Maltings constructed from bedroom furniture, wardrobes piled high, soprano Sarah Tynan took to her elevated bed, where she “dreamt” her way through a program of music leading to *Les Illuminations*. There was more Britten—*Young Apollo*, *Reveille* for violin and piano—plus Debussy's string quartet and “Shaking and Trembling” from John Adams' *Shaker Loops*, all chosen for their visionary qualities.

As *Les Illuminations* began, Tynan “woke” and told the story of her dreams. And if singing from a narrow wooden bed several feet off the stage seems a challenge, that was just the half of it. She was constantly drawn into the circus choreography, ending the cycle with “Départ” sitting in a hoop that wound its way up to the roof as the lights faded.

As entertainment it was certainly arresting and there were truly great performances from all involved—Tynan's clear, soaring soprano unhindered by the non-musical demands, the Aurora Orchestra playing with vigor and warmth under Nicholas Collon, and the nine-strong circus troupe impressing with their skills.

If there were doubts, they concerned the extent to which those skills can be sustained throughout a 75-minute work, and the question of whether they sometimes drew attention away from the song cycle rather than illustrating it. Between them, Rimbaud and Britten created a work that needs no help, and less might have been more in presenting it on stage.

Nevertheless, this was a suitably off-the-wall show to start the festival with a bang. It is Pierre-Laurent Aimard's last as artistic director after eight years, and his swansong is to be June 19 with a day-long performance of Messiaen's *Catalogue d'Oiseaux*, with the audience witnessing the real dawn chorus at 3.30am before the first concert at sunrise, 4.30am. The final concert – Night – begins at 11pm.

Back at the opening weekend, Thomas Zehetmair was in Aldeburgh Church on the morning of June 11 with a solo violin program of Bach, Karl Amadeus Hartmann (d. 1963), and Bernd Alois Zimmermann (d. 1970). The Bach B minor Partita was everything that is needed to make a Saturday morning perfect, Zehetmair's phrasing, articulation, and dynamic control superb.

His playing was no less impressive in the extreme technical and musical demands of Hartmann's second violin sonata. At times pulsing with visceral power, at times contemplative, it is a masterful work that should be heard more often. There were more fireworks in Zimmermann's solo violin sonata, delivered with fiery panache.

In an afternoon concert, Birmingham Contemporary Music Group had a wacky program of Benedict Mason and Julian Anderson, the former's *Nodding Trilliums and Curve-Lined Angles* of 1990 referring, he says, to the flora and fauna of Western Massachusetts. That state must have some energetic flora and fauna, for the piece burst with rhythmic fire and was given its due by the BCMG, whose percussion section was kept on the run between instruments that included slide whistles, bird warblers, and spinning tops. Even conductor Ilan Volkov joined in, playing triangle and wood blocks.

It was by far the more arresting of the two Mason works, the second half devoted to the curiously old-fashioned 30-minute *Horn Strings and Harmony* (2016), in which players wandered about the empty performance space variously delivering little squirts of brass, whacking wood blocks and oversized cowbells, running brushes round the walls, bouncing balls, and messing with two prepared pianos. Fifty years ago it would have been amusing. Now it seemed an exercise in tedium, though excellently executed.

The players were in top form too for Julian Anderson's *The Comedy of Change* (2009), a colorful and much-detailed piece in seven movements.

The evening saw the first of three concerts from François-Xavier Roth's ensemble Les Siècles. The program offered two takes on an ancient myth, Rameau's *Daphnis et Eglé* and Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé*. The Rameau was delivered with style and elegance by the band, whose high string and wind players stood to play. Elegant in black, they were surrounded by the wardrobes of the opening night's *Les Illuminations*, the circus ropes hanging above their heads. During Rameau's Gigue we almost expected the circus performers to bound on.

After a shaky start with a few broken brass notes, the Ravel settled into a grand wallow of a performance, Roth glorying in the richness of the score without losing any of its detailed articulation.

The 2016 festival runs to June 26, packing in more world-class musical performances than any small seaside town should hope to expect. When the season ends and the parking attendants go back to their day jobs, Roger Wright and his team settle down to the bigger plan and convincing the world that Aldeburgh Music is a good deal more than a highly impressive festival in June.

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