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Music in Drumcliffe

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St Columba's Church, Drumcliffe, Co Sligo

It's a strong sign of maturity when a chamber music festival can offer more content out of leftfield than from the mainstream. Wexford Festival Opera seems the obvious comparison, except that Wexford is actually predicated on the unearthing of obscurities.

Music in Drumcliffe – formerly the Vogler Spring Festival – has never been that. But in recent years, Sligo's great May bank holiday weekend festival has been practically daring its audiences to keep coming despite a shift away from core repertoire.

Well, they do keep coming, with most concerts sold-out in this its 13th year. The line-up was not without old favourites, among them Schubert's Death and the Maiden Quartet and the Brahms Clarinet Quintet. But these were all inventively packaged alongside less obvious fare. As well, very often not only the piece but also the player was new and different. The young Swiss violinist Malwina Sosnowski was invited to Sligo by Frank Reinecke – festival director and member of the Vogler Quartet, which is still Drumcliffe's ensemble-in-residence – after he heard her in an exam.

She gave an eager, deeply involved account of Szymanowski's early Violin Sonata, which, because of all it owes to Brahmsian romanticism, is less often programmed than his later, more characteristic music. She then deployed her youthful zeal to vivifying effect as leader in a mainstream masterpiece, Mozart's G minor Piano Quartet.

Likewise, the Brahms Clarinet Quintet received an injection of youth from American clarinetist Moran Katz, who also, played the 1952 Three Songs without Words by the German-Palestinian composer Paul Ben-Haim.

Another young player championing music outside the standard repertoire – all of it Irish – was Belfast pianist Michael McHale. On either side of probably John Field's best-known nocturne (No 4 in A) he gave a jaunty account of The Beardless Boy – from Philip Hammond's 2011 Miniatures and Modulations – and then something really out there: Roslyn Castle, a picturesque 1856 "souvenir of Scotland" by Maritana's Waterford-born William Vincent Wallace.

After ruminating darkly on the eponymous folk-tune, it closes with a Lisztian treatment of The British Grenadiers. Did it belong here? Maybe, maybe not. Did it provide colour, contrast, fun and pleasure? Oh yes.

In all, McHale had a great festival, both here and in large-scale works, such as the Elgar Piano Quintet with the Vogler, and the Rachmaninov Cello Sonata, in which he sensitively partnered the similarly young Irish cellist Brian O'Kane, who ranged beautifully between the work's melancholic intimacy and its flashes of the composer's orchestral sound-world.

O'Kane was one of no less than three cellists in Drumcliffe, including the Vogler's Stephan Forck and, perhaps this year's star, Nicolas Altstaedt. The three joined forces with pianist Friedemann Rieger for another outré item, David Popper's mellow 1891 Requiem for Three Cellos. And then, three cellists, but only one Bach Solo Suite? This was the No 1 in G in a swift, technically spellbinding if almost recklessly flexible account by Altstaedt.

Instead, then, of more suites – the staples you might have expected – Altstaedt gave breath-taking performances, in turn dancing and soulful, of two of Bach's Sonatas for Viola da Gamba (BWVs 1027 and 1029) with harpsichordist Jonathan Cohen in a late-night concert that was the highlight of a highlight-rich festival.

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