

A YOUNG OBOIST IN CARLISLE

Why am I telling you about this concert? Firstly, I think it is exactly the sort of concert that Vaughan Williams would have approved of. Secondly, because I think you ought to know about the soloist.

Since May 2018, when grant funding from the Arts Council and Carlisle City Council ceased, the only way that you can hear orchestral music in this city is by going to a concert given by the City of Carlisle Orchestra. This is an amateur/semi-professional group, and they have excellent concert programmes. Some of their players do make mistakes, but their commitment to the music being played and their ability to convey the spirit of the music is exceptional. Professional orchestras don't always manage this. In 2007 we had a performance of Vaughan Williams's Symphony No. 5 by a visiting London orchestra and it was dreadful – not many wrong notes, but absolutely no enthusiasm or spirit. Friends wanted to know why I was an enthusiast! Fortunately, the BBC Philharmonic came four years later and gave a wonderful performance, and my friends understood. Getting the notes right is no good if the music is dead, so I am happy for the CoCO to make a few mistakes because they get the spirit of the music really well. And they did it once again in this concert ably conducted by Leon Reimer. He is German, but if you are from Scotland you'll probably know all about him from his work with choirs and amateur orchestras. He has done wonders with the CoCO.

The concert took place in St. John's Church in Carlisle, on Saturday 29 June. All the music was very competently played. I had heard Hamish MacCunn's concert overture *The Land of the Mountain and the Flood* in November 2017 in Liverpool when the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra gave the *Sea Symphony*. But the CoCO did a very good job, and Vaughan Williams's *English Folk Song Suite* was also very well played. I was very interested in the Elgar *Wand of Youth* extracts. The orchestra hopped backwards and forwards between the two suites: 'The Wild Bears' from Suite No. 2, for example, was followed by 'Slumber Scene' from Suite No. 1, providing a very good contrast and showing that the CoCO was as good with quiet music as well as with the boisterous.

The high point of the concert for me was Vaughan Williams's Oboe Concerto. The soloist was Isabel Kent who comes from Burgh-by-Sands, not far from Carlisle, and who went to the Nelson Thomlinson School in Wigton (where Lord Bragg also attended). There she started playing the oboe and also piano. She studied at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, and then went on an exchange to the Royal College of Music in Stockholm. In the pre-concert talk Isabel said that she had always wanted to play Vaughan Williams's concerto. Her first public performance of the work was at this concert, and for my ears her playing was well-nigh perfect. The first time I heard a live performance was when I was a student in Manchester sixty years ago, when Sir John and Lady Barbirolli performed the work with the Hallé. I don't

remember much about it, other than being intrigued by having husband and wife appearing on the platform as conductor and soloist! But more recently I have heard Jonathan Small perform it with the RLPO and Vernon Handley, and I have them on CD.

On this occasion I was struck by the similarities in the first movement with *The Lark Ascending*. If that work is so popular, why doesn't the Oboe Concerto get played more often? In any event, after such an excellent performance I am sure we will hear more of Isabel Kent in the future.

Ian K. Watson



Isabel Kent