

Rare rewards in the penny bazaar

CLASSICAL MUSIC

European Union Baroque Orchestra

Greyfriars Kirk, Edinburgh

Scottish Chamber Orchestra

Usher Hall, Edinburgh

Wednesday marked the midway point of the Edinburgh International Festival – and possibly its high point. There was a world premiere in the Usher Hall by Giorgio Battistelli, a leading Italian composer. A couple of hours earlier, the popular “Bach at Greyfriars” series featured the Danish harpsichordist Lars Ulrik Mortensen, one of the most inspirational period interpreters.

Battistelli's 18-minute tone poem did not live up to its billing, and the composer wasn't even present to take a bow. Mortensen more than fulfilled expectations. But these are minutiae in the context of the festival's plummeting reputation. The 2009 programme looks like a penny bazaar next to the Manchester Biennale or Salzburg. In years of plenty Edinburgh failed to invest. Now, in an age of heightened competition, it is reaping the reward: it has been marginalised not only internationally but also on its own doorstep. The real festival now takes place among the Royal Mile buskers and in fringe theatres.

After three years under Jonathan Mills, the festival's Australian director, it's impossible to discern what kind of festival he believes Edinburgh should be, other than less “stuffy” than his predecessor's – which at least filled houses and provoked discussion.

At the Usher Hall big names are conspicuous by their absence. There is no sense of event. The opera programme includes a 10-year-old puppet show, a staging by a dead German director and a *Flying Dutchman* conducted not by Scotland's world-renowned Wagnerian, Donald Runnicles, who happens to be in town, but by Mills's compatriot, Simone Young, who is bringing the Hamburg State Opera for a single concert performance.

In speeches and media interviews, Mills comes across as uncomfortable in Edinburgh. His contract ends in 2011. Has it crossed anyone's mind

that now is the time to start canvassing for a successor? Probably not. Mills himself was appointed with barely a year to prepare. It's all symptomatic of civic ambivalence – an attitude that results in the sort of technical disaster (a recurring problem at Usher Hall) that forced Joyce DiDonato to make three false starts in her performance of Haydn's *Scena di Berenice* on Saturday.

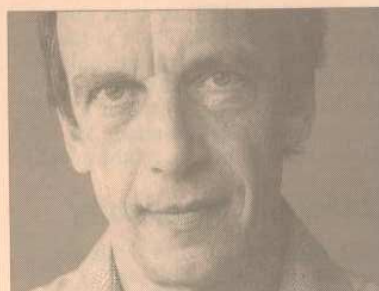
Mortensen was on terrific form at Greyfriars, directing the European Union Baroque Orchestra from the keyboard. He played the harpsichord concerto that Bach transcribed from his Violin Concerto in E and dazzled us with his energy, virtuosity and rhythmic verve, none of it self-serving: what a contrast to the inhibited emotional language of his Anglo-Saxon contemporaries. The concerto was framed by secular solo cantatas by Bach and Handel, showcasing the Swedish soprano Maria Keohane: why haven't we heard more of this hugely personable singer? Her voice – agile, substantial, radiant – blossomed in Greyfriars' surround-sound acoustic. ★★★★★

Battistelli's *Fair is foul, foul is fair*, a festival commission, was the centrepiece of a Scottish Chamber Orchestra concert conducted by Garry Walker. It's a lightly scored stormscape – all pregnant glissandos and scurrying strings – that scowls and growls impressionistically before running out of ideas.

The second half was devoted to the choral version of Haydn's *The Seven Last Words of our Saviour on the Cross*. Walker, with the excellent SCO Chorus and a solo quartet led by Rebecca Evans, made a decent stab at it, without convincing me that it gets anywhere near the focus and spiritual scope of the original, instrumental version. ★★☆☆☆

Andrew Clark

www.eif.co.uk



Inspirational: Lars Ulrik Mortensen