

CELEBRATION FOR GWYN Birmingham Town Hall

The idea of a Memorial Concert strikes a funereal note, but this was in fact a joyous celebration of the life and work of Gwyn Williams, a much-loved viola-player with the CBSO for several decades, who passed away two years ago. His work will live on with the foundation of the Gwyn Williams Charitable Trust for Young Viola Players, administered by Birmingham Conservatoire.

So many of his friends and colleagues from the orchestra and elsewhere, as well as from the P & O classical music cruises masterminded by his wife Stephannie, joined together in this Town Hall which had been his performing home for so many years to deliver a programme brimming with musical uplift, and genially hosted by Classic FM's Nick Bailey.

The spiritual core of the evening was a wonderful account of Vaughan Williams' ineffable Serenade to Music, 16 professional singers brought together by renowned mezzo-soprano Yvonne Howard, and with probably the most expert unpaid orchestra ever assembled (Gwyn's old string mucker Philip Head the fixer), conducted by another ex- CBSO colleague, Michael Seal.

Seal also directed a taut, urgent and utterly compelling Elgar Introduction and Allegro for Strings, absolutely remarkable for a scratch performance. The solo quartet was the ConTempo, RTE Quartet in Residence in Ireland, but who later revealed their Romanian roots with a roistering Men's Dance.

Of course there were string solos: Alexei Sarkisov's spellbinding cello in Saint-Saens' The Swan, Jean Kelly the sonorous harpist, and Kelly also bringing a Celtic twang to John Wilson's Rosie's Tune, with Christopher Yates virtually vocal in the viola melody. And Andreea Banciu was soloist in Herbert Howell's Elegy for Viola, String Quartet (Conservatoire head of strings Louise Lansdown replacing her in the Con Tempo's contribution) and String Orchestra.

Organ works opened each half of this exhilarating programme, Henry Fairs magisterial in the famous Widor Toccata (what security of pedal-octaving!), and 16-year-old Christopher Too paying moving homage to Francis Jackson with that much-loved centenarian's Organ Fanfare -- played on the organ installed under Mendelssohn's supervision nearly two centuries ago.

One surprise came up which will particularly stick in the memory of everyone present.. Birmingham Conservatoire student Yue Yu, still only 19, was the

richly-toned soloist in the Romance for Viola and Orchestra by Max Bruch. Julian Lloyd Webber conducted a hand-picked string orchestra from the Conservatoire, and the impact of this loving, generous, and little-known music will not easily be forgotten.

Christopher Morley

This review first appeared in the Birmingham Post