



Iwan and the Philomusica of Aberystwyth; *The Railway Children* at Glyndebourne; recent MusicFest guests, the



Solem Quartet and Ayanna Witter-Johnson



## FEST TO IMPRESS

Earlier this year, RPS Member Carol Nixon told us about her involvement with **Musicfest Aberystwyth**, a burgeoning musical engine that brings such joy to its community each Summer. We're now pleased to be supporting their performance of the newest opera by 2026 RPS Award-winner Mark-Anthony Turnage. MusicFest's Artistic Director **Iwan Teifion Davies** shares what's in store...

Last October, the cancellation of a Baroque violin recital in the programme for this year's Musicfest posed a problem, but also an opportunity. What to replace it with? This year's festival is designed around the theme of 'When I was a child...', and features specially-curated programmes from Llyr Williams, the Solem Quartet, the VOCES8 Scholars, a new jazz set from trumpeter Tomos Williams, the irrepressible Sinfonia Cymru, and a large-scale community concert, where the latter will play side-by-side with the Philomusica of Aberystwyth, local choirs, and leading Welsh soloists.

So what else? Later that month, I happened to read the positive reviews of the new Mark-Anthony Turnage opera *The Railway Children*, with a libretto by Rachael Hower. Recognising it would be a perfect fit thematically, being a great fan of the composer's work, and not being shy of a challenge, this seemed the perfect opportunity. A concert performance: the second ever outing of the piece, following its premiere run at Glyndebourne. A much bigger undertaking than a solo violin recital, but a very exciting prospect for Musicfest!

Largely due to my own background as an opera conductor, we've started presenting opera in concert. Last year, with the orchestra of Welsh National Opera, we gave the first performance since 1960 of Arwel Hughes's Welsh opera *Serch yw'r Doctor*, with a libretto by Saunders Lewis, the pre-eminent politician and dramatist of 20th Century Wales. It was extremely well-received by our audience, as well as being of cultural significance; we are

all too ready in Wales to forget about the creative work of past generations, and to view it as inferior to that made elsewhere. The performance of *Serch* celebrated the creativity of two great Welsh artists, plus the talents of the orchestra and leading Welsh soloists Fflur Wyn, Paul Carey Jones, Robert Lewis, Sioned Gwen Davies and Steffan Lloyd Owen.

Aberystwyth has a long tradition of welcoming the great composers of the day – a century ago, Henry Walford Davies, Professor of Music, introduced Vaughan Williams, Elgar and Holst to the town's audiences. In 1922, Bartók gave his first UK recital in the Parish Hall – which Walford Davies himself infamously described as 'baffling'! It's been my mission to commission as many Welsh composers as possible, giving them the opportunity to write big orchestral works. David John Roche, Claire Victoria Roberts, Sarah Lianne Lewis, Nathan James Dearden, Mared Emlyn, Jefferson Lobo, Simmy Singh, Gareth Glyn and Gwydion Rhys have all written new works, either for Musicfest or the Philomusica. Bringing Mark-Anthony Turnage, one of our

most distinguished composers, to Musicfest therefore seemed wholly appropriate. Happily, WNO were ready to collaborate again, and I was able to reassemble most of the original cast. The concert will take place on Monday 20 July.

The festival then closes with a performance of a work by David de Lloyd, who followed Walford Davies as Professor of Music, entitled *Tír na nÓg*. Another almost-forgotten composer, de Lloyd called this piece an opera, though in reality it's closer to a cantata. I believe this will be its first performance since it was broadcast in 1936, and we're combining it with a new violin concerto by Kian Ravaei, developed as part of a composers' scheme run by the university, supported by the Arts Council of Wales. This year's Musicfest therefore celebrates Aberystwyth's musical heritage alongside its innovation. At a time when live performance and music education are being eroded, we're striving with Musicfest to provide meaningful experiences to audiences new and old; to challenge and to entertain.