

Music



Academy of St Martin in the Fields in Dartington (review)

20th April 2009

One of the dangers when you hear any top ensemble live for the first time is that it might not live up to expectations.

On the other hand, it might make such a lasting impression that anything else simply pales by comparison.

This was exactly the case when the strings of the world-renowned Academy of St Martin in the Fields played to a packed audience in the glorious surroundings of Dartington's Great Hall.

Unlike many other local venues, the building really favoured the sound of these mere twenty players, but the stunning performance was down to so much more than the acoustic alone.

Playing without a conductor means that each section is utterly reliant on complete interaction and empathy, as well as the expertise of the director and every section-leader.

In Kenneth Sillito there could be no finer candidate, whose total dominance whether as leader, or as soloist with Harvey de Souza in a quite breathtaking reading of Malcolm Arnold's Double Violin Concerto, was immense, but never overbearing.

For a string orchestra, this was an adventurous programme, with works by Elgar, Tchaikovsky and Grieg conspicuous by their absence.

Britten, Arnold, Musgrave and Walton might indeed not seem immediately appealing, but such was the Academy's sheer power of persuasion and brilliant execution, that this concert and its programme will be something to cherish for many years to come.

PHILIP R BUTTALL

