

REVIEWS

Missing out on many good things in Dorchester

CLASSICAL

English Music Festival

DORCHESTER ABBEY

IT WOULD be difficult to imagine a more fragrant spot than Dorchester-on-Thames in Oxfordshire for this first English Music Festival, but equally it would be disingenuous to claim that the village is on everyone's doorstep. Maybe it was the rural seclusion that contributed to the fact that the abbey was hardly heaving with patrons for the flagship inaugural concert on Friday, given by the BBC Concert Orchestra under David Lloyd-Jones.

The modest attendance was a pity, because a great deal of passion had gone in to planning this event, and the programming was out of the ordinary. As Boris Johnson, the festival's president, said last week, there is no need

to apologise for English music when, as we heard here, there are works of strength by the likes of Holst, Vaughan Williams and Frank Bridge.

The most familiar item was Sullivan's "Irish Symphony", in itself scarcely a core repertoire work, and, it must be said, not the most persuasive either. But two different facets of Holst were more interesting. On the one hand, there was his "Invocation" for cello and orchestra, travelling very much in the same orbit as "Venus" from *The Planets*. On the other, there was his "Walt Whitman Overture", in which "The Planets" seemed to be light years away. The overture is an early work, a robust piece in which the German influences of Wagner, Mendelssohn and Strauss are barely concealed, but it had an exhilarating thrust which Lloyd-Jones and the orchestra harnessed spiritedly.

The evening had started with a rousing, celebratory fanfare by Gareth Wood, written for the

BBC's current *Listen Up!* series embracing a broad spectrum of British orchestras and of which this concert was a part. Vaughan Williams's "Norfolk Rhapsody" No 1 evoked a quieter, mistier Englishness of the fens, beautifully and supplely played and intriguing in the way that its little gusts of woodwind filigree seemed to pre-echo devices that Britten employed to moot the mystery of Suffolk in "Peter Grimes".

The soloist in Holst's "Invocation" was Julian Lloyd Webber, who also played Bridge's "Oration", a work haunted by memories of the First World War. Darkly rhapsodic, brooding and bitter, the music is intensely reflective, and Lloyd Webber's performance encompassed a range of affecting emotion that was deeply poignant.

Festival ends tomorrow
englishmusicfestival.org.uk

Geoffrey Norris