

Classical

ENGLISH MUSIC FESTIVAL

Dorchester Abbey
DORCHESTER-ON-THAMES ★★★★★

Any festival that boasts Boris Johnson as president sounds like a boisterous occasion. Heirs and Rebels, the first English Music Festival to be mounted in and around Dorchester, south Oxfordshire, is devoted to the "diversity, innovation and brilliance" of English composers often neglected in concert programming.

It's a bold venture. Where else would one bump into the Viola Sonata of Algonon Ashton, a rhapsody by Elgar's supporter William Reed, and a suite by Benjamin Dale? Or venture into Lord Berners' *Luna Park*, and spot Jeremy Irons narrating Vaughan Williams's *An Oxford Elegy*?

The five-day festival's opening concert was given by the BBC Concert Orchestra, which rapidly made its mark with a blistering fanfare – shades of Tippett and Walton, but cleverly original – newly commissioned from Gareth Wood. Stylish and witty, it could win a place in the repertoire.

The chance to hear rare Holst, scintillatingly played,

was welcome. His *Walt Whitman Overture* of 1899 occupies an attractive netherworld of post-*Meistersinger* froth; it could have used even more élan than it received here.

Clarinet and viola heralding Vaughan Williams's Norfolk Rhapsody No 1 unleashed a shiveringly beautiful performance, revelling in the warmth of the folk song idiom, utterly fresh in its day (1906).

The most bracing work was by Britten's mentor, Frank Bridge. *Oration*, his haunting cello concerto, is a passionate outcry against the ravages of the Great War. The inexorable trudge of its dark, passacaglia-like cortege, chromatic and knotty, seemed to sum up the miseries of the Front. Julian Lloyd Webber proved utterly sympathetic to the angst-ridden solo line, as the cello strives to extricate a pained and poignant lyricism from the tensions of the orchestral hinterland.

Lloyd Webber returned for more Holst – his rarely-heard *Invocation* (1911) – for a memorable second half contribution. Yet it was Sullivan who made the running, his Irish Symphony given the full works, setting the pace for the symphonies of Stanford to come. Patently English music, and palpably alive and kicking.

Roderic Dunnett