

PREMIERES OF THE YEAR

CM writers pick their most interesting new musical experiences of the last 12 months

ROBERT BEALE

The first half of the year was a rich time for premieres in Manchester, particularly in the Bridgewater Hall's Debussy festival, which included much more than just Debussy.

Two of the new pieces were written for unusual performer line-ups, and notable for thus expanding the repertoire as well as for their innate value. **Yoshihiro Kanno's** *Sky Maze*, for organ and piano, performed by Jonathan Scott and Noriko Ogawa during the Debussy festival in May, is startlingly successful in making the Goliath and David combination work and creating a genuinely musical partnership between them – and it has an extraordinarily powerful ending.

And the one I shall not forget in a long time was **Carl Davis's** *Last Train To Tomorrow*, given by the Hallé Children's Choir and Hallé Orchestra in June. A 40-minute sequence of songs for children's soloists and chorus, with spoken text for actors and a small orchestra accompaniment, it tells the story of the 1938/9 Kindertransport, which saved thousands of Jewish children from the Nazis. It is vintage Davis – approachable, heartfelt, even sentimental, but passionate and single-minded in its message. If you want something for a top-class children's choir to really get their teeth into, try this. It's not often a new work's world premiere gets a standing ovation from the entire hall.

ANDREW GREEN

The Scottish invasion of the Royal Albert Hall for BBC Prom 31 included not just the variously combined forces of the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra and the National Youth Orchestra of Scotland, the two Scots who had centre stage – conductor Donald Runnicles and violinist Nicola Benedetti (playing Bruch's *Scottish Fantasy*) – and the London premiere of a short, invigorating fanfare by James MacMillan.

Because leading the charge was the Loch Ness Monster. Yes. Courtesy of the world premiere of **Thea Musgrave's** *A Postcard from Scotland*, which despite its title was nothing more, nothing less, than a day in the life of Nessie. We could be in no doubt of this, because the ever-young 84-year-old composer told us so – describing in her note his (Nessie is assumed to be masculine, it seems) emergence from the deep as the sun disperses the mists; his day of sunbathing; and then the dart back down to his all too familiar territory before the moon rises over the loch.

Do some still deride programme music? Well, being left in no doubt about *A Postcard from Scotland's* inspiration for one thing meant we could especially revel in the expertise and good humour of the tuba playing of the BBCSSO's Ben Thomson. For he it was that gave us the very embodiment

of the monster of the evening. Who could not believe in Nessie after that characterful rendition?

CLARE STEVENS

Amid the many impressive new or revised works performed at the Presteigne Festival, the pick of this year's crop for me was **Michael Berkeley's** oboe quintet. Commissioned by the festival and wonderfully performed by Nicholas Daniel and the Carducci Quartet, this eloquent and deeply poignant single-span work is inspired by the paintings of John Craxton, brother of Daniel's teacher Janet Craxton, some of which were exhibited at Presteigne.

Travelling (a little) further from this Welsh correspondent's doorstep, I was full of admiration for **Dobrinka Tabakova's** *Centuries of Meditation*, performed by the Three Choirs Festival Youth Choir and the Orchestra of the Swan under David Hill in Hereford Cathedral. Highlights of Tabakova's skilful setting of words by Thomas Traherne include a fabulously ethereal conclusion to its second section, the unexpected entry of the organ and a spectacular conclusion with cascades of bells. By turns exuberant and contemplative, it captures the essence of English choral sound, but reinterprets it for a new generation.

My ultimate Premiere of the Year for 2012, however, has to be the *Requiem for the Lost Souls of the Titanic* by **Philip Hammond**,



Adam Gorb:
English wistfulness



A Nessie business:
Thea Musgrave's *A Postcard from Scotland*



Dobrinka Tabakova:
Reinterpreting the
English choral sound