

23 November 2010

## Concert Nash Ensemble Wigmore Hall

★★★★☆

There's nothing to hit but the heights. When Kim Criswell made a surprise appearance at the Wigmore Hall at the weekend, hair flaming red, body bound in twinkling midnight blue, she made rapid eye contact with one particular woman in the audience. Amelia Freedman — indefatigable commissioner, programmer, impresario, founder-director of the Nash Ensemble and, as Harrison Birtwistle put it, nothing less than the Arsène Wenger of music — was celebrating her 70th birthday. Forty-six years of the Nash, 160 commissions of new music, 260 premieres — and not forgetting tireless support for Arsenal FC.

Yes, the Nash, which takes its name from John Nash's elegant terraces in nearby Regent's Park, is long established as the country's leading chamber ensemble and one could imagine no more fitting venue than the Wigmore for this celebration.

Everything was coming up roses for Freedman, who is also artistic director of last week's Bath Mozartfest. Sunday's concert was a microcosm of so much that she has done in her life: loyal support of burgeoning young composers (and many others in the music profession), thematic programming, adventurous casting — and always a surprise.

The official surprises here came in the form of Criswell and her pianist Nathan Martin; and Thomas Allen, no less, with Roger Vignoles. With the piano strutting out, and the face droll with disdain, they performed Ravel's *The Peacock* (from the *Histoires*

*naturelles*) to perfection. The evening had begun with an exuberant and glowing performance of Ravel's *Introduction and Allegro* for string quartet with harp (Lucy Wakeford, exquisitely delicately fingered), flute (the Nash stalwart Philippa Davies) and clarinet (the delectable Richard Hosford). And then Felicity Lott, striding on stage in bright orange silk, to join Hosford and Ian Brown (piano) for another Nash classic, Schubert's *The Shepherd on the Rock*.

In between celebratory performances of Spohr's Nonet in F and Dvorák's Quintet in A, a *Garland of Birthday Pieces for Amelia* threaded its colourful way through. These turned out to be tiny, three-minute masterpieces from seven composers particularly close to Freedman's heart. I particularly enjoyed Simon Holt's *fugaz* for oboe, clarinet and bassoon, all coils and curlicues in its serenading; David Matthews's setting of Freedman's beloved A. E. Housman in *In Valleys Green and Still* (Lott, plus string quartet); and the artfully organised chaos of Michael Berkeley's *Musical Chairs* for piano, wind soloists and string trio — a perpetuum mobile, just like Freedman herself. And, best and most substantial of all, Harrison Birtwistle's *Crescent Moon over the Irrational*: as loud with silences and sudden bright wonders as a canvas by Paul Klee.

Hilary Finch

**Broadcast on Radio 3 tonight at 7pm**