

Sounds and Sweet Airs at the Lighthouse, Poole

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(Four stars out of five)

As a nine-year-old schoolboy I wasn't much interested in Shakespeare's 400th birthday, and I will need to live to 109 to see his 500th. So I'm grateful that, in Poole at least, they are celebrating his 450th with what passes in Dorset for frenzy. I'm not sure what Shakespeare's connection with the Bournemouth area was — but it must have been huge, because this concert of more than a dozen pieces inspired by his plays and poems was an epic community effort.

Before the interval the excellent Kokoro (the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra's new music group) and Mark Forkgen's London choir Canticum presented modern pieces. In the second half the spirited Dorset Youth Orchestra and Bournemouth Symphony Chorus resuscitated rather more tuneful Shakespearean scores (Walton, Vaughan Williams, Finzi) from the earlier 20th century. And whenever the music stopped, drama students from Arts University Bournemouth hurled out blank verse with irresistible fervour. For a while the Poole Lighthouse was as theatrically charged as the Globe.

Highlights? Though they echoed Britten at times, Hywel Davies's new *Five Shakespeare Sonnets*, eloquently sung by Lawrence Williams, were intelligent responses to the texts, with mellow, elegiac instrumental colours. Much more vivid, and superbly played by Kokoro, were Thomas Adès's quirky and fantastical *Court Studies* from *The Tempest*. And Oliver Knussen's early *Ophelia Dances*, with its sudden move from manic movement to tragic stillness, still strikes me as a miniature masterpiece.

For sumptuous beauty, however, not even Vaughan Williams's *Serenade to Music* could match the unaccompanied choral pieces with which Canticum opened the programme: *Our Joyful'st Feast* by Einojuhani Rautavaara. In an otherwise all-British programme the Finn's mellifluous harmonies were a timely reminder that, from Berlioz and Mendelssohn to Verdi and Prokofiev, most of the greatest Shakespeare music has been written by foreigners.