

Premiere is highlight of a fine concert

Saddleworth Festival: Northern Chamber Orchestra

St Chad's Church, Uppermill

THE 2015 Saddleworth Festival closed with a concert by a world-class chamber orchestra that included a world premiere.

The Lord Rhodes Concert, named after the festival's founder, was given by the Northern Chamber Orchestra, directed by violinist Nicholas Ward.

The orchestra established its credentials with the opening bars of the opening item, Lennox Berkeley's Divertimento in B-flat. In many respects this was the most musically absorbing piece in the concert, and we heard the full qualities of the excellent ensemble's fine balance and notably sumptuous woodwind tone.

This was followed by an oddity — a brisk performance on strings of an early 13th century vocal piece by Perotin, a French composer who was one of the originators of polyphonic music. The piece commemorated the 800th anniversary of the concert's venue.

The evening included two fine pieces of film music by Oldham-born composer William Walton, from the 1940s movies "Henry V" and "The First of the Few", as well as popular works by Delius, "On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring" and "Summer Night on the River". They were well-enough played but their reputation for atmosphere and evocation is perhaps a little exaggerated.

Before the interval, Nicholas Ward was the violin soloist for Vaughan Williams' "The Lark Ascending", regularly voted the country's favourite piece of classical music, though familiarity doesn't diminish its quality as perhaps the ultimate musical expression of English pastoralism.

The soloist was superb, with perfect intonation in the high positions. The advantage of hearing the piece played by a genuine chamber orchestra is that fine details of the orchestration emerged with greater clarity.

The centrepiece of the concert was the specially-commissioned "Saddleworth Festival Dances", by local composer Peter Martin. This proved a highly expert and melodic piece of light music and stands comparison with the various regional dance suites of Malcolm Arnold.

Martin chose to evoke Saddleworth's Whit Walks, Rushcart Festival — complete with a folk melody from the tunebook of a local fiddler — and the district's annual Wartime Weekend, a commemoration

of the 1940s.

This movement gave the composer the opportunity to compose and arrange a pleasant pastiche of swing music.

Central to the work — and described as an interlude rather than a dance — was the atmospheric “Raven Stones”, inspired by the bleaker aspects of the district’s Pennine moorland. This has some very fine details, especially the stark opening and closing theme.

The composer introduces some rather lush harmonies midway through the movement and this perhaps dilutes the bleakness of the atmosphere, but at least this prevents “Raven Stones” being too out of kilter with the rest of an otherwise sunny, upbeat composition that deserves to find a place in the light classical repertoire.

Played to a large audience, the concert was a fine conclusion to a highly-varied week of artistic events in this most picturesque part of the district.