



## Cheltenham music festival review – rousing premieres by female composers

**Various venues, Cheltenham** The festival honoured a pledge for gender parity with striking new work by Judith Weir, Dani Howard and Thea Musgrave

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**T**he Cheltenham music festival celebrates its 75th anniversary this year. Dedicated from the outset to performing the work of contemporary British composers, that commitment continues, with three premieres from Judith Weir, Dani Howard and Thea Musgrave on the opening weekend also underlining Cheltenham's signing up to a 50/50 gender split by 2022, part of the PRS foundation's Keychange pledge.

Weir's *The Prelude*, performed by the Nash Ensemble with flautist Philippa Davies and a trio of strings, took the form of a five-section suite. Flowing lyrically and sounding more benign than implied in two of the titles, *Waltz Macabre* and *Menuet Sauvage*, this emerged as an attractive potential companion to Mozart's flute quartets.

Flow was also the concern of Howard's *Gates of Spring*, effectively the overture to the London Symphony Orchestra's concert with conductor Elim Chan. Howard's musical narrative charted Cheltenham's evolution from country backwater to bustling spa thanks to the discovery of

mineral springs three centuries ago, moving from rural calm to bubbling gurgles and gradually more explosive surges towards a fuller orchestral plushness.



Singing with her instrument ... Cheltenham music festival director Alison Balsom.

Musgrave's Trumpet Concerto was written specially for Alison Balsom, Cheltenham's artistic director, whose sole instruction was that she loved to sing with her instrument. Also inspired by paintings of trees by Victoria Crowe, Musgrave seized on the idea of energy reaching up from the tree's deepest roots and high into the air as a metaphor for life, a notion all the more striking for coming from a composer who, at 91, still brims with her own life force. Musgrave's propensity for the theatrical gesture was reflected in the trumpet's early teasing of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra's players into expanding dialogues. With brass deliberately absent from the scoring, the most dramatic exchange came with the belated appearance of another trumpet - the CBSO's Jonathan Holland - behind the violas, challenging Balsom in imitative volleys of notes before arriving at harmonic acquiescence. After the relatively anodyne nature of this and the earlier premieres, William Walton's First Symphony under the baton of Edward Gardner had a welcome ferocity.

. Cheltenham music festival runs until 14 July.

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