

Aldeburgh Festival: Works by Bach and Brahms

Leon Fleisher and the Signum Quartet

Snape Maltings,  5 stars

Take an 82 year old pianist, one-time pupil of Schnabel, add four fine young string players just out of an Aldeburgh residency, put them onstage together and what do you get? The answer is one of this year's finest Aldeburgh Festival concerts, an evening of joyous music making that will live long in the memory of those who attended.

Leon Fleisher, now into his ninth decade, gave all would-be pianists in the capacity audience a master class in how to make the piano sing, how to produce a tone so hushed and delicate that you can barely hear 800 people breathing any more. His focus on the sound he creates, his concentration on the shaping of each chord, each musical phrase, is masterly. But all this 'work', as Richter used to put it, is merely the background to a pianist who makes his keyboard sing, who lets his music breathe, who sits impassively on a chair (no piano stool in sight) and who scarcely seems to break sweat as he conjures up the musical lines he discerns in the music before him. Vintage stuff.



The first half was Bach pur and Bach arranged by others, for solo piano. Egon Petri's arrangement of Sheep may safely graze from BWV 208 may not be to everybody's taste, but Fleisher played it in the grand Romantic manner, with plenty of rubato and a wonderful sense of dynamic contrast between the left hand melody and the right hand passage work. The six short characterful movements from the B flat Capriccio followed, Fleisher giving each movement a

colour and personality all of its own. More substantial fare came with the D minor Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue, Fleisher relishing the dissonances galore in this astonishingly modern work!

And then we came to the tour de force of the solo part of the evening, the Brahms arrangement of Bach's Chaconne (originally for violin) in D minor. Fleisher made the left hand arrangement sound like four hands at times: broken chords, enormous spreads of sound, fabulous passage work, all produced with a big, even, creamy tone from the big fortissimos to the most hushed pianissimo. His control of his instrument was complete but his pianism never merely showy. It was music making of the highest order, recalling conductor Pierre Monteux's famous description of Fleisher in 1944 as "the pianistic find of the century". Sixty-six years later, we are of course privileged to have Fleisher still playing in the next century.

After the interval he was joined by the Signum Quartet for the Brahms Piano Quintet in F minor. The co-founder of the Aldeburgh Festival, Benjamin Britten, may not have had much liking for Brahms but he surely would have relished this performance: solidly underpinned by Fleisher, who acted as quasi-conductor throughout, the four young musicians gave a finely-wrought, lyrical performance of this appealing work. I have heard the scherzo taken faster and the andante slower, but **with musicianship at this level there was much to savour throughout: a beautiful sound balance, some wonderful interplay in the inner parts and a fine sense of line that always kept the music moving forward.** The players were perhaps a tiny bit over-cautious at times, listening to each other very carefully (and producing some beautiful sound), but they caught the rhythms and the Wagnerian overtones of the work and, in the final Allegro, pianist and quartet let down their guard and, as one, went in for uninhibited, visceral excitement in the coda. It made a **splendid ending to a memorable Festival evening.**

By Mike Reynolds - Photo: Leon Fleisher by Stephanie Kuykendal