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The Garden of Proserpine, Dorchester Abbey, Oxfordshire

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It could have been a mere curiosity, or simply not very good. When an extensive piece by a major composer has to wait more than a century for a world premiere, it's easy to be sceptical. Less so in this case. *The Garden of Proserpine*, Vaughan Williams's setting of the poem by Victorian writer Algernon Swinburne and his first attempt at a large-scale work, sated more than just curiosity when it rounded off the English Music Festival in Oxfordshire on Monday.

Williams had yet to hone his distinctive voice when he completed the work for soprano soloist, chorus and full orchestra in 1899. This was before he had studied with Ravel in Paris; before he had combed the English countryside for folk songs and carols. *Proserpine* is not the Williams we have come to know; perhaps that is why he abandoned it.

Yet it contains plenty of interest: a simmering sense of tension; strong pacing and an unflinching bleakness that looks ahead to his fully mature pieces. The choice of text helps. Swinburne's antitheistic poem about the world of the dead – highly controversial when it was published in 1866 – most likely appealed to Williams's own unconventional spiritual outlook. His musical setting plays off the words' lugubrious sentiment, combining a world-weary beat with a sombre melodic line that draws out the poetry's lyricism.

Proserpine was teamed with two of Williams' later works: *Five Variants of Dives and Lazarus* and *Fantasia on Greensleeves*. It was an effective way of demonstrating, not only his stylistic development, but the melancholic thread that binds these pieces.

The rest of the programme was taken up with Delius's whimsical *Walk to the Paradise Garden* and two rather more feverish works: Holst's *Egdon Heath* and York Bowen's *Rhapsody for Cello and Orchestra* – glossily sheathed in soloist Raphael Wallfisch's sleek tones.

Under David Hill, the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra sustained the momentum throughout, a pre-requisite in *Proserpine*. Together with the Joyful Company of Singers and soprano Jane Irwin, the orchestra proved sensitive advocates for the piece. Elsewhere, they breathed life into melodies, without resorting to sentimentality.

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