

The Cross-Eyed Pianist August 3, 2018

[Rye Arts Festival – a preview with the classical music Director](#)



For this, its 47th year, [Rye Arts Festival](#) has a new director of Classical Music, cellist Alison Moncrieff-Kelly. With this year's festival just over a month away, I asked Alison to give us a taster of some of the highlights on the programme and to tell us a little more about what goes into organising a festival....

What can we expect from the classical music element in this year's Rye Arts Festival and what are the events we should be looking out for?

As the incoming Classical Music Director for the Rye Arts Festival (RAF), I felt that I had to do a bit of research into what had gone before. The Festival has a wonderful pedigree, and the spread of musical interest has been remarkable; but what I did notice was that singers in particular had been less represented than other performers. So I lifted the phone to my close friend Iain Burnside, to brainstorm ideas. I very much admire the work Iain does in curating dramatised performances; and as one of the themes of the Festival is commemoration of the end of the First World War, it seemed like a perfect opportunity to put on 'First War Poet of England Am I', a celebration of the songs and poems of Ivor Gurney. This will bring to the Rye Arts Festival [Roderick Williams](#), along with [Iain Burnside](#) and the actor Philip Franks, who will perform the poems. It's an incredible privilege to have this combination of talent in our first week.

We also have Dame Emma Kirkby leading a programme of music by Dowland, Campion, Danyel and Ford with her group, Dowland Works. This is a wonderful opportunity to fill St Mary's Church, Rye with that famous crystalline voice.

I have tried to vary the offer, so there is also a big choral event – City of London Choir are performing a programme of Elgar, followed by the Duruflé Requiem. Chamber recitals include The Revolutionary Drawing Room, who are performing 'Music in Time of War' in Winchelsea Church, and violinist Ani Batikian will perform music 'From Armenia to Armistice'.

We have two wonderful pianists in the Festival: [Danny Driver](#) joins us for a recital that will include Rachmaninov, York Bowen and Henriette Bosmans. Then Kenny Broberg, winner of last year's Hastings International Piano Concerto Competition, makes a welcome return to the Festival, performing the Mozart G Major piano concerto with the Hastings Philharmonic. This performance marks the beginning of a new relationship between the Rye Arts Festival and the Hastings Philharmonic.

We are also delighted to be consolidating a long-standing relationship with the Worshipful Company of Musicians by promoting two of their young artists in our lunchtime series – guitarist Laura Snowden and Buck Brass Trio.

Alisdair Kitchen and Euphonia Studio are giving the only UK performances of *Les Mamelles des Tiresias* this year. We are very proud to have Alisdair on board as Rye Arts Festival's in-house opera director – he's a veritable powerhouse of creative invention!

How did you select the performers/programmes for this year's Festival?

The idea was to start with the WW1 theme, and work from there. It's been fascinating to discover how many strands led out of that central theme – so for instance, the Armenian armistice idea was very much Ani's own inspiration. I love the enthusiasm that all the performers show for the Festival and the WW1 theme – the excitement has been extraordinary.

Can you tell us more about your role as Director of Classical Music?

My role is to create the classical music element of the Festival and to make sure that as many elements of the musical spectrum as possible are represented. I already have plans in place for the next two years, and am looking forward to continuing to broaden the scope of what the Festival offers.

This is your first year as Director of Classical Music for the Festival. What have been the challenges and pleasures?

It's been a steep learning curve in terms of the organisational aspects of the job – an awful lot to put into place for a September Festival when I was only appointed in October; but the committee has been wonderfully supportive, and I have found the energy and commitment around me incredibly stimulating. That, and the spontaneous enthusiasm from the performers has been really heartening.

What can people expect from the Festival? What kind of audience does it draw and what do you hope people will take away from the Festival?

People can expect a wide-ranging and varied programme, with some younger, emerging talent alongside stars of the classical firmament such as Roderick Williams and Emma Kirkby. The audience comes both from the local area and from London – there are a lot of second home owners in Rye, so the net is cast pretty wide. I hope people take away a sense that the whole of the Rye area is expanding in cultural terms. It's really accessible from London, and the town is magical – fabulous history, atmosphere, literary connections.

How do you see the music festival developing under your directorship?

I'd like to develop the mixed-media idiom that we initiate this season with Iain Burnside's Gurney show. Iain is a fountain of creativity and I want to tap into that! I'm interested in several of his shows – *Schwanengesang*, which is a composite of the song cycle with dramatic interludes, was a brilliant piece of theatre that I saw him produce at the Guildhall. I also want to build on Emma Kirkby's first appearance at the Festival: we're discussing a residency for next year, to combine some workshops as well as performances. Other than that I'm really open to new ideas – definitely want to move away from the traditional recital mould as the only form. There's so much potential for other ways of performing.

You are a musician yourself – has this affected your approach to RAF?

Yes – I remember a friend of mine who works in management telling me that he thought he would make a really good manager, because he had been so badly managed so many times in the past, that he really knew what was needed to keep his staff happy. I have experienced some of the best and some of the worst of this challenging profession, and I think I know how to invite people to offer their best ideas, rather than telling them. Time will tell; but I'm a great believer in letting artists have their heads – they know far more about it from their vantage point on the stage, intuiting the audience response.

What are you most excited about in this year's programme? What are your personal highlights?

I'm really challenged to answer this one, because I'm excited about the whole Festival, and not just the musical part: I anticipate getting no sleep for two weeks while I try to attend every single event! It's a fantastic multi-arts Festival with a staggering range of talent and skill. Ask me again afterwards!