



Benjamin Baker, *violinist*

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Southrepps Sinfonia and Soloists, Southrepps Festival

David Nice | *The Arts Desk* | August 3, 2015

It only takes one outstanding musician with links to an out-of-the-way place to gather his or her top-notch friends and give a mini-festival of international quality. They're springing up all over the UK: guiding lights that come to mind are violinist Anthony Marwood in Peasmarch and tenor Toby Spence at Wardsbrook Farm. Now another leading British tenor, Ben Johnson, has set up a Young Artists' Programme and a band of the brightest and best young string players in the village of Southrepps, less than two miles from the beautiful North Norfolk coast. What I heard in two of the seven concerts was string playing that you'd be fortunate to encounter anywhere in the world.

Word of mouth connects players of equal calibre. Indeed, the way I heard about it shows how it works. I first came across Ben Baker, New Zealand-born violinist who's just released his first CD, leading a superlative Mendelssohn Octet at the East Neuk Festival. Our next meeting was at Paavo Järvi's Pärnu Festival, where Baker was playing in the Festival Orchestra and where his Estonian girlfriend Marike Krupp was leading the Academy Orchestra (she was also in the Southrepps Sinfonia). Baker gave an incandescent performance in Pärnu of Korngold's piano-quartet Suite with, among others, his old Yehudi Menuhin School friend, the cellist and conductor Jonathan Bloxham. There they told me about their next engagement at Southrepps. A Schubert String Quintet with these two bracketing three other young players was bound to be something extraordinary. And it was.

No less so was the 18-piece string orchestra led by Baker (pictured right on Sunday morning) and conducted with focus by Ben Johnson the previous evening. In the helpfully unreverberant acoustic of high-towered St James's Church, pleasingly bare within despite the (excellent) Victorian restoration of the nave and with light flooding through the leaded Decorated-era windows, this team offered every gradation of sound from ghost-whispers to blazing unisons and multi-part splendours underpinned by the resonance of the two double-basses which you could feel behind your back in the wooden bench supports.

It was a carefully chosen programme of English string music with an interloper in the form of Australian-born Percy Grainger's *Handel in the Strand*. That brought in the local connection, pianist Tom Primrose, to take the lead and rattle along with the rest. The pairing could have given us a real centre of gravity, or rather of light, in the form of Britten's short but elemental *Young Apollo* – next year, perhaps, with Stravinsky's *Apollon musagète* to complement – but there was still sufficient intensity in the young(ish) Britten's *Prelude and Fugue*, darting elaborations versus a heart of darkness, and plenty of fire to the reworking of childhood inspirations in the *Simple Symphony* ("Playful Pizzicato", teasingly done, was bound to be the movement one came out humming).