

In praise of women

Alan Frost is bowled over by female artistry.

I have a soft spot for the film *Dead Poets Society* because the character played by Robin Williams reminds me so much of Mr Roberts, my polyhistoric English teacher at grammar school. He it was who enthused in class about the excellence of the film *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, who was midwife at the birth of my love for Shakespeare, who fired my obsession with organ music, who once held a class while inhaling Friar's Balsam underneath a towel, who ensured we knew the nine orders of angels, and who introduced me to the works of John Donne. I wonder whether today's teachers may recite the highly erotic and taxonomic words of *To his Mistress going to bed* to those not of marriageable age without breaching some aspect of the Children Act. Donne tends to place women on a pedestal, if they're not already between the sheets, and this month I found myself in great sympathy with his elevated view as I reaped the benefit of female artistic talent.

Pavão is the Portuguese word for peacock. The Pavão String Quartet is led by Karenza Peacock, and its viola player, Natalia Gomes, is originally from Portugal. Jenny Sacha and Bryony James complete the glamorous ensemble formed in 1998 at the Royal Academy of Music and the climax of their well-played concert was a performance of Schubert's Quartet in D minor, *Death and the Maiden*. Ironies abound. The piece was played by four 'maidens'; they are in their late 20s as was Schubert when he composed the piece; Death's message to the maiden of 'sleeping softly in my arms' had more immediate relevance to the autumnal audience than to a young woman; and Schubert died only a few years after composing the piece. The second movement, based on Schubert's song of the same name, was exquisite, assisted greatly by sympathetic communication between the musicians. The finale begins with the dryness of old bones but concludes with a whirlwind tarantella which projects an image of crazed skeletons sweeping the dying maiden not to a soft sleep but to a thrilling and exhausting afterlife.

Reborn in Bournemouth

And breathless we were after Marin Alsop led the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra in Mahler's Symphony No 2 in C minor, the 'Resurrection', at the opening of its new season. We were not just gulping but deafened also by this mighty work. Along with half-a-million Radio 3 listeners we relished Mahler's response to

Beethoven's Ninth. Beethoven had closed the classical period with a challenge to those following to invent something new because the Ninth was such an extreme expression of the traditional symphony that the form had to be invented. Mahler, like Schubert, was obsessed with the imagery of death, and his second symphony is an innovative, spiritual masterpiece. The high spot for me was the voice of Karen Cargill as she sang *Urlicht* (primeval light) but this was a life-affirming evening throughout.

Inspired in Stratford

If you see a play directed by Nancy Meckler I believe you are unlikely to be disappointed. I had seen her performance of *ID* with Anthony Sher at the Almeida and last year I waxed lyrical about *House of Desires* at Stratford. Her production of *The Comedy of Errors* at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre is the funniest I have seen. She clearly has a way of getting the best from the actors and must surely encourage improvisation. There was an abundance of sight and verbal gags, each Antipholus and each Dromio excelled, and the ensemble playing was faultless. The design was intriguing in that some of the cast were caricatured in their dress and the way they wore their hair. Later I realised that they bore a heavy resemblance to characters in a particular type of proprietary jigsaw called WASGJ. These are great fun and require completion, with the aid of clues, of a scene that is not shown. No 4 in the series is hilarious and concerns Bertie the Bigamist whose tell-tale shock of hair I saw on stage as well as the cartoon costumes. Was this the inspiration for the designer?

Zealous in Dorset

The final tribute to female artistry this month goes to Lady Digby, who for the past 43 years has been the powerhouse behind the Summer Music Society of Dorset. Her indefatigable zeal for music led her to create a series of concerts held in various venues in the county, including her own home at Minterne Magna. Alas, she is relinquishing many of her duties but her legacy will endure. At the final recital of the season Roger Vignoles accompanied Ronan Collett and Roger Padmore in a special Trafalgar concert called 'The Sea'. Look out for Ronan Collett. He's only 23 and still studying but has an amazing baritone voice.

See 'Sex and death' on p22 for details of A light Frost, a collection of Alan's articles.