

23 June 2025

Aldeburgh Festival review — magical Strauss and five-star Sibelius

Tenor Allan Clayton was superlative in Britten and Sakari Oramo conducted a [sensational performance of Sibelius Fifth](#) in concerts that you can stream from home [Rebecca Franks](#)

Monday June 23 2025, 3.00pm, The Times



Sakari Oramo and the BBC Symphony Orchestra delivered a beautifully balanced sound

BRITTEN PEARS ARTS

The summer solstice began with a sunrise gathering on the pebbly Aldeburgh beach and ended with an orchestral sunset in the red-brick glow of Snape Maltings concert hall. As the luminous Anu Komsis sang of a vast peace in the *Four Last Songs*, and the flute-larks trilled upwards, it felt as if time itself had stretched out, a musical echo of the longest day.

Strauss's swansong made for a deeply satisfying ending to the first of the BBC Symphony Orchestra's two concerts at the Aldeburgh Festival, even if programming it straight after *Tod und Verklärung* did send us to our (metaphorical) deaths twice in one evening. Willingly so,

however, given that the conductor Sakari Oramo and his band were impassioned, stirring up emotions and giving us beautifully balanced sound.

The concert opened with Daniel Kidane's *Awake*, formerly known as *Woke* and, it seems, quietly rebranded since its 2019 Proms premiere. It's certainly an energetic piece although it leans too heavily on a surging fortissimo final chord for its audience appeal. Still, it ably set the scene for the overdue UK premiere of Helen Grime's 2016 Violin Concerto. Harking back to an earlier era in her career, the concerto is less direct in its expression than her more recent pieces. Nonetheless, its fierce energy is compelling, especially when a fearless virtuoso like Leila Josefowicz is let loose on its volleys of notes. Nor did the violinist short-change the music's dreamier, delicate moments.

We had more Grime in the second of the BBC Symphony's concerts the next day, with her *Night Songs*, an atmospheric nocturnal miniature. There was another new concerto too, this time courtesy of Brian Elias and the horn player Ben Goldscheider. Once again, time stretched and contracted — at least, that's what the composer hoped to do, he told us in his programme note, though I can't say I'd have picked that up just from listening. Goldscheider provided a golden thread to hang on to as the music moved from scurrying frenzies to lyrical material, before disappearing with playful understatement.

Elsewhere, there were two standout performances. The tenor Allan Clayton was superlative in Britten's *Our Hunting Fathers*, an emotionally and technically tricky work musing on man's inhumanity to animals and humans. Clayton held us in its discomfort, gripping with every word and note. And we witnessed another artist in his element in the concert's finale when Oramo conducted a glorious Sibelius Symphony No 5, which had the intensity of a heatwave. A five-star performance all the way, and one not to miss when it's broadcast on Radio 3.

Sandwiched between these two orchestra concerts, on Sunday afternoon in the Britten Studio there was a generously filled recital paying tribute to Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, 100 years after he was born. *To Dieter* was the brainchild of Benjamin Appl, the German baritone's last private pupil, who was joined by the pianist James Baillieu and the actor Jamie Newall to tell Fischer-Dieskau's story skilfully through words and music (though there were no song texts or surtitles).

Appl's voice was pushed to its edges in a programme ranging from Schubert to Eisler, Brahms to Britten but he found ever more emotional freedom as the concert progressed and was at times on his poignant best. "Am I already forgotten by posterity?" Fischer-Dieskau asked Appl not long before his death in 2012. Not on this evidence.

★★★★☆

The BBC Symphony Orchestra concerts are broadcast on Radio 3/BBC Sounds Jun 23 and 24. Festival continues to Jun 29