

# THE TIMES

19 June 2026

## Aldeburgh Festival review – who doesn't love some vintage agitprop?

Hans Werner Henze was so much more fun in his radical chic youth than as the dull serialist he later became, as the London Sinfonietta demonstrated at Aldeburgh



[Richard Morrison](#), Chief Culture Writer  
Thursday June 18 2026, 12.00pm, The Times

Outside Snape Maltings it was 2026. Inside, for one afternoon only at the Aldeburgh Festival, we were back in the stropy, turbulent 1970s, as the London Sinfonietta revived an epic protest work it had premiered 53 years ago. It was Hans Werner Henze's *Voices*, a 90-minute song cycle (wisely cut to 65 here) that brought together pretty well the entire anthology of agitprop holy writ from the mid-20th century, from Brecht to Ho Chi Minh, and set it to music that veered from Weimar cabaret style to Latin American dances with a lot of avant-garde zaniness in between.

At one stage balloons were popped and a thundersheet given a hell of a pounding. Snatches of radio broadcasts were also in the mix, and the Sinfonietta players had to double on everything from panpipes to handbells, as well as stamping and shouting slogans.

I loved it, mainly for nostalgic reasons. Henze was so much more fun in his radical chic youth than as the dull serialist he later became. And the conductor here, Christian Karlsen, and vocal soloists, Carina Vinke and Christopher Gillett (the latter bravely stepping in at short notice) struck just the right balance between revolutionary fervour and wry irony. Thank goodness the workers of the world still haven't united and overthrown the shackles of capitalism, as Henze rather touchingly thought they would. It means we can go on enjoying the indignant declamations of *Voices* for another half-century.

Fittingly the Henze was preceded by modern protest songs. They included some very creditable pieces by local teenagers, orchestrated by Louise Drewett, plus Drewett's own rather static *Environmental Songs* and – the best of the bunch – Nathalie Joachim's *I will want to sing of my country*. With the vocal solo performed powerfully by the composer, it projected righteous anger about conditions in her native Haiti in music that was deceptively lulling at first then rocked by harsh brass eruptions.

Later on Wednesday the Britten Sinfonia, playing under Gemma New's direction, presented a quirky programme, starting with Steve Stelios Adam's *Et dogn* for solo recorders (the excellent Genevieve Lacey) and electronics, moving on to Lisa Illean's sweet string orchestra variants on chansons by the 15th-century composer Gilles Binchois, then the UK premiere of Illean's own *Swellsong* (more very slow music for strings, recorder and electronics). Finally came Brett Dean's early 20-minute orchestral whirlwind *Carlo*, incorporating snatches of Gesualdo's music and apparently depicting his notoriously homicidal personality.

And that was just the concert's first half. The second half comprised Britten's 1963 Cello Symphony, written for Rostropovich at the height of the Cold War and sounding very troubled and muddled. Laura van der Heijden played it with tremendous fire, but it's not a piece that's easy to like or indeed understand.

★★★★☆

The Britten Sinfonia concert is available on [BBC Sounds](#)