

Leicester MusicFest 2018 continues to wow with its talent and inclusivity, promising a bright future.

Perform. Educate. Inspire: with award-winning professional and talented local participants of all ages and abilities, Leicester MusicFest 2018 lived up to its motto

Reporter: *Daljinder Johal*

Offering unique performance opportunities for amateur musicians of all ages, Leicester MusicFest 2018 built on last year's inaugural festival's success and expanded to a four-day event of high-quality musical expression, from masterclasses to performances featuring award-winning professionals.

Leicester MusicFest 2018 took place from February 9 to 12, at English Martyrs' Catholic School, a local secondary school with excellent music facilities including its St Cecilia Performing Arts Centre and the final pipe organ of Leicestershire organ builder, Peter Collins.

Its grand opening was the spectacular Baroque opera, Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, featuring young and upcoming soloists, the Hesperides Quartet on period instruments, a chorus line of Leicester University Chamber Choir and the English Martyrs' *Schola Cantorum*. Professor Nigel Simeone, from BBC Radio 4's *Tales From the Stage*, introduced the evening with an insight into the opera's shrouded past.

The following days supported emerging talent with competitions guided by professional adjudicators for the piano, guitar, organ and for singing. Competitors had the special chance to receive individual, constructive feedback from these experienced professionals in the relaxed and supportive atmosphere of the festival, encouraged by an audience of their peers, friends, family and members of the public.

1st, 2nd and 3rd place awards were given, but the event truly welcomed all ages and abilities equally. In Sunday's Advanced Stage & Screen Solo (Senior) competition alone, participants ranged from mid-teens to mature singers.

Mother-of-two, Debra Perry, revealed that the event was only her second time performing a solo in public. Yet she delivered a confident performance of Jerome Kern's "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man", which adjudicator James Newby described as "fantastic" and "fun" for her and the audience.

Alongside this upbeat performance, observers enjoyed everything from familiar favourites like 'Ain't That a Kick in the Head' to pieces from beloved musicals, including Les Misérables' 'I Dreamed a Dream'.

Similarly, the masterclasses with award-winning soprano and teacher Harriet Burns and prestigious accompaniment award-winner Ian Tindale on piano delighted and educated the audience, and raised performers to greater levels of musicality. The individual coaching in a friendly and encouraging environment attentively guided participants through exercises to improve technique and presentation.

However, the festival always kept up its light-hearted and inclusive atmosphere. The St Cecilia Auditorium was filled with laughter as Burns showed participants the benefits of singing into a glass of water with a straw and trying to control the bubbles - all without giggling.

In fact, even the casual observer had plenty of chance to learn throughout the festival. The workshop *Everyone Can Sing!* lived up to its promise. Choral specialist, Helen Smee, playfully challenged young and old with brainteaser-like singing activities. After working together to sing in rounds and signing to the Scottish folk song, 'Wild Mountain Thyme', everyone left smiling.

Other instruments were equally celebrated by the festival. It provided access to the school's two-manual organ with 28 speaking stops, and a Shigeru Kawai handmade concert grand piano. Saturday also saw Lincoln Cathedral's Director of Music, Aric Prentice, lead an interactive workshop on the workings of the organ with the handmade STELLOS model. Then, Rob Johns and Roy Courtnall's guitar recital with illustrated lecture rounded off the festival on Monday.

A spectacular gala concert drew in an enthusiastic audience for selected competition winners to delight and entertain once again on Sunday evening. This was followed by a captivating song recital from the award-winning James Newby and Panaretos Kyriatzidis on piano.

Fulfilling the festival's aim of widening access to inspiring performances for its amateur musicians, Newby's exceptional storytelling ability and Kyriatzidis' expressive piano performance added a finishing touch to the festival's mission to: "Perform. Educate. Inspire".

This year, Leicester MusicFest 2018 gave a tantalising glimpse into the promising potential of the festival in the years to come.