

# Review

by Joe Conway

*Leon King (viola), St John's Peterborough, August 14*

## Commitment and passion

**T**his was a successful and satisfying recital which nevertheless took many conventional expectations and stood them on their heads.

First of all there's accessibility. Quite understandably there's an assumption that most classical concerts will include plenty of familiar music that's easy on the ear. Yet Leon King's uncompromising programme was largely made up of unfamiliar works. Among them his own Suite for viola, receiving its world premiere and therefore a completely unknown quantity.

Then there's the comparative rarity of a concert featuring just one stringed instrument without piano accompaniment. Of course

solo violin recitals happen occasionally but they're usually limited to Bach sonatas and partitas in the absence of other material. The same applies to solo cello recitals. But Leon King deviated even further from the norm by presenting a recital featuring the Cinderella of the stringed instrument family, the viola.

Even reviewers are allowed their favourites, or at least I hope so! And while I love the indispensable beauty of the violin, the eloquence of the cello, and the 'crunch' of the double-bass, I have a particular soft spot for the ravishing sound of the viola. Slightly larger than the violin its bottom note is a fifth lower, which makes seven extra notes available, and gives the entire range of the instrument

a sweetly poignant sound.

What's so good to report is that I wasn't alone in my appreciation. The large audience at St John's clearly relished both the viola sound and the unusual repertoire. Yes, the instrument, the unaccompanied texture, and much of the music were well off the beaten track, but the commitment and passion of Leon King's playing were unmistakable.

His programme consisted of three substantial works beginning with Paul Hindemith's five-movement Sonata of 1922. To people familiar with the Symphony Mathis der Maler, the Symphonic Metamorphoses, and the Cello Concerto, all of which are appealingly tuneful, this dissonant and difficult work by the great German composer will have

come as a surprise. But Leon King's advocacy was such that its brooding sincerity was never in any doubt.

Interestingly Leon's own six-movement Suite, written last year, while clearly influenced by the Hindemith, was actually less astringent. Particularly pleasing was its use of the whole range of the instrument, its contemporary reworking of the Baroque in a splendid Courante, and its pronounced rhythmic bite, often reinforced by hefty double-stopping.

Sandwiched between the two relatively modern works was Bach's first Cello Suite played an octave higher than originally written. The lovely mellifluous 18th century dance movements providing a perfect contrast.

