

Oliver Knussen at St David's Hall

A musical asset for the nation

By IFAN PAYNE

REVIEW

OLIVER Knussen is one of Britain's foremost composers and conductors and a prominent proselytiser for modern music.

So it is interesting to hear what he has to say through his performances of the major landmarks of 20th century music.

Schoenberg's bejewelled *Chamber Symphony No 1* has the tonal fragrance and sensual colours of a Klimt painting.

In keeping with that period, Knussen's approach to the work, when he conducted the London Sinfonietta in St David's Hall on Monday evening, was to place it firmly in its context of the high romance of Gurrelieder and *Verklaerte Nacht*. This, I felt, is how a sequel to *Ariadne* might have sounded as Strauss developed in a tonally more progressive direction.

The performance, to which violinist Nona Liddell's expressive tone contributed a great deal, was one of romantic ardour, rhythmic vibrancy and was lovingly balanced and phrased.

From Schoenberg, via

Erwartung and *Pierrot Lunaire* to Peter Maxwell-Davies's *Revelation and Fall*, a monologue for soprano and small orchestra with the shock value of slitting your eyeballs to view the horror of the maggots crawling over your nightmares.

Where *Wozzek*'s plunge into the blood-dripping lake ends, *Revelation and Fall* takes off. Maxwell Davies's stunning orchestration was powerfully executed by the London Sinfonietta, and the mezzo soprano Linda Hirst gave a display of astounding accuracy and control in her utterly convincing portrayal of the narrator victim.

Between these two powerful works Simon Bainbridge's humorous and playful *Concertante in Moto Perpetuo* for oboe and orchestra, delightfully performed, provided a satisfying respite.

What a national asset the London Sinfonietta showed itself to be in this stimulating concert of the very highest quality of both music and execution.