

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN CONCERT SERIES 2017 – 2018

BBC SINGERS

GERGELY MADARAS: Director

SIMON NIEMIŃSKI: Organ

St MACHAR'S CATHEDRAL

Thursday 23rd November, 2017

Having been completely bowled over by their dazzlingly brilliant performance on Thursday, I would not tend to call the eighteen members of the BBC Singers, nine male and nine female voices a choir; I like to think of them rather as a voice orchestra. Each voice was crucial to the performance, on their own or together in so many varied confections. The proof of their quality came when we heard so many of them as soloists. Of course, like the very best vocal ensembles, they were able to produce the most perfectly balanced sound blends, but then in tuttis, the best orchestras can do that equally well.

All but one of the works in the programme on Thursday were by living composers. Two of those being University Music Staff Members, were in St Machar's to hear virtually unmatched performances of their works. They must surely have found that very satisfying indeed – I certainly did.

The first piece in the programme was by Phillip Cooke. It was receiving its World Premiere on Thursday. I have always enjoyed his choral settings. I particularly remember Invocation (2012), his marvellous setting of Edward Thomas's poem Adelstrop.

Cooke seems to have a knack for finding poems that lend themselves particularly well to musical settings. Today's was of verses by the Irish poet Seamus O'Sullivan entitled The Twilight People. I was reminded in a slightly sidewise way of Charles Villiers Stanford's song The Bluebird. It was not that Cooke's writing sounded in any way like Stanford's piece but I was impressed by the way in which both settings were able to create a vista or a scene, to bring it vibrantly to life and to draw us, the audience, right into it.

O'Sullivan's poem starts thus:

*It is a whisper among the hazel bushes;
It is a long, low, whispering voice that fills
With a sad music the bending and swaying rushes;
It is a heartbeat deep in the quiet hills.*

Phillip Cooke's music brought these words vibrantly to life. The words 'it is a whisper' genuinely whispered by various voices across the ensemble ran throughout the piece conjuring up the breezes rustling through the hazel bushes. Listening to this, the surroundings of the Cathedral melted away and there I was among the hazel bushes. The music of course went much farther than this. There were wonderful resonant deep basses, a fine tenor solo and high soaring sopranos. What a stunningly atmospheric work. It provided a splendid introduction to the individual voices of the BBC Singers and to their rich and sometimes startling harmonic blends. Cooke's harmonies could clash deliciously or melt pleasingly conjuring up the landscapes from the poem and the feelings these expressed therein.

Vocal colours were on display even more dazzlingly in the Missa Brevis by Zoltán Kodály. The opening moments of the Mass entitled Introitus introduced us to the marvellous playing of our guest organist Simon Niemiński, he was fantastic. The voices when they first entered were used almost like contrasting keyboards on the organ, the Kyrie began with altos and basses then tenors and sopranos creating diverse sound blends. There were fine vocal solos, ringing tenor, deliciously seductive alto and rich resonant bass. The organ introduced the Sanctus ringingly, the Benedictus was shared across the various choral sections, a delicious display of ever changing vocal colours and then a thrilling surprise as the Hosannah in excelsis exploded in the most bracing and invigorating way. Bracing was really the key word to describe this fantastically rich and colourful

performance. The final add on, *Ite, missa est* began with a thunderous organ crescendo before the voices added their wholly satisfying contribution to bring the work to its conclusion. This was not a piece I had ever heard before but I would certainly like to hear it again. It concluded the first half of the concert and was an introduction to the four contemporary works that were to follow. All of these were tonal yet startlingly novel and very different.

Seek Him that Maketh the Seven Stars was a mystical piece by Jonathan Dove. The organ provided a couple of different backgrounds to the voices. The first was a glittering motif rather like musical tinsel that twinkled enticingly in the background. The second was a series of powerful chords. The word settings were repeated multiply - 'Seek Him, Seek Him' not really in a minimalist way but something more mysterious. Many of the chords sung by the ensemble had a special gleam about them. The work was quite graphic as far as stars were concerned but there was so much in this piece that was astonishing and new – not like anything heard before.

A New Song by James MacMillan, recently a composer in residence at the University, was full of variety in sound and texture. The organ began with swirls of sound and the ends of some of the vocal melodies were almost like a calligrapher's brush strokes in the way that they swished to a conclusion. The melodies were strong and often simple like plainsong perhaps? There was a rich harmonic palette in the work and at the end a powerful conclusion for organ with a strong held pedal – absolutely magnificent, I thought.

Paul Meallor's *To Seek Where Shadows Are* was an a cappella setting of four different poems by Christina Rossetti. These were very different and expressed a broadening of Meallor's expanding talents as a composer. The first section *Dreaming* had a sinuous melody for sopranos underscored by a repeated rhythmic pattern sung softly by the rest of the ensemble. It was unusual but attractive the kind of thing that in popular music is sometimes described as 'a hook', something that grabs you and reels you in. It certainly did that for me.

Dreamland was coloured by Meallor's familiar harmonic language. It is something very special and rather unique. It is something that first prompted me to describe Meallor's music as a new and fresh approach to tonal composition. I loved it.

The third section simply entitled *Song* had a kind of melodic simplicity bringing together first basses and altos then tenors and sopranos. There were also little dabs of harmonic writing that were special.

The final part of the work was a splendid setting of the carol *In the Bleak Midwinter*. I think this Meallor setting deserves to have a place alongside the two famous ones by Gustav Holst and Harold Darke. I particularly liked the attractive baritone solo – and then as described in the programme note there was that special Meallor touch when "as the texture dissolves, a soprano and alto solo introduce the words that form the title of the cycle".

The final work in the programme was another a cappella setting this time by Gabriel Jackson entitled *Winter Heavens*. Sudden surges or vocal stabs, textures built up from whole lines of male voices as soloists and then something similar from the female voices or just adding light dabs of vocal colour. This was a work full of rich rhythmic surprises. It was proof along with the other four contemporary works by Cooke, Dove, MacMillan and Meallor that unlike what I was taught as a young student, tonal composition is very far from being outmoded and dead. There are still so many amazingly different possibilities.

I loved today's performance by the BBC Singers. Can I just conclude by mentioning the marvellous deep bass, he was like what the Russians describe as an octavist.

There is an amusing story regarding one famous exponent of the technique. He was touring Russia astonishing the audiences with his deep bass singing. At one venue however he suddenly turned white and fled the stage in tears. It was because one ancient bearded member of the audience was joining in with him an octave below!