

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN CONCERT SERIES 2017 – 2018
THE FOURTH ANNUAL CARLAW-OGSTON COMPOSITION COMPETITION
FEATURING MEMBERS OF SPECTRUM NEW MUSIC ENSEMBLE -
PERCUSSIONISTS:
BRODIE McCASH, PETER NEY, MURRAY BARTLE and IAN CHRISTIE
VIOLA: SASKIA MUCKE
SOPRANOS: MHAIRI SHARP and LISA JOHNSTON
DIRECTOR OF THE NEW MUSIC ENSEMBLE: KATHLEEN CRONIE
COMPETITION JUDGE: PROFESSOR PETE STOLLERY
MASTER OF CEREMONIES: Dr PHILLIP COOKE
KING'S COLLEGE CHAPEL
Thursday 15th March, 2018

There was an encouragingly large audience for the fourth annual Carlaw-Ogston Composition Competition featuring performances by members of Spectrum New Music Ensemble. The five young composers including third and fourth year students and graduate students were all seated up front awaiting their performances and a brief introductory conversation with Master of Ceremonies for the evening, Dr Phillip Cooke, himself a composer of considerable note.

Although four out of the five compositions all exploited the University's current boom in exceptionally talented percussionists, they were palpably different in every way. There was one of the five that stood out from the others in that it used two soprano voices, a written text, and no percussion at all. The inspirations of the pieces were very different too as explained in the interesting programme notes. I felt that every one of the new pieces was a winner for many reasons. The performances themselves were of absolutely unbeatable quality, making this probably the best ever Carlaw-Ogston Competition to date.

The first piece was by Brodie McCash. It was entitled Black Mirror. It was named after and influenced by a television series of the same name. I am afraid I have never seen that series but there were so many aspects of Brodie McCash's piece that I admired. Brodie is himself a very talented and knowledgeable percussionist and this positively shone forth in his writing across a large percussion orchestra. In the piece he was joined by Peter Ney. They used every sort of tuned percussion – marimba, vibraphone and glockenspiel made to sound in many different ways including the use of bows. There was also a splendid thunderous middle section with tom toms. The use of a huge gong was a wonderful addition to a splendidly colourful percussion sound-world. As the two players interacted and moved round the various instruments I was reminded of Evelyn Glennie at her most virtuosic – although of course she does it all on her own.

The second piece, entitled Tinged with Red, was by James Aburn, a top University clarinettist. He set the final section of a poem by Karel Jaromir Erben a mid nineteenth century Czech folklorist and poet. His poem The Water Goblin was also the inspiration for one of Dvořák's most popular Symphonic Poems of the same name. The section of the poem printed in the programme does not really tell the full story. The two singers are mother and daughter. The daughter having fallen into a pond while washing her clothes, was kidnapped by the Water Goblin and forced to marry. She had a baby but begged to be allowed to go home alone to visit her mother. Her mother did not want her to go back to the Goblin who was thus infuriated, and here the final part of the story comes in with the poem set by James Aburn. In a wild storm, the Goblin comes to the house and having decapitated the baby throws the two parts of its body against the door of the cottage. It sounds like a fairy tale and yet the papers are regularly full of stories of fathers who having fallen out with their wives or girlfriends kill their children.

The two unaccompanied singers, Mhairi Sharp and Lisa Johnston, were absolutely fabulous in their performance of Aburn's music. Their harmonies were very telling, bringing to life the mysterious, folkloric atmosphere of the story. I loved the lines of unison between the two voices which then

ended in a strident harmonic clash – enormously difficult to do but accomplished to perfection by our two marvellous sopranos.

The third piece entitled Pangea Ultima was by Scott Bathgate whose main instrument is saxophone. He employed the initially unlikely sounding instrumental combination of viola played by Saskia Mucke and vibraphone played by Murray Bartle. The inspiration of his piece was the idea that continental drift will cause the continents to drift together into one single continent again in the far future. The bringing together of viola and vibes in such an amazingly harmonious way as demonstrated in Scott Bathgate's piece was a fascinating symbol for the coming together of the continents.

The vibraphone was made to sound both smooth and brittle while the viola was used in a similar fashion, smooth or pizzicato and with splendid almost folksy rattling rhythms. The vibes could produce chords by means of two bows or made to sound edgy when hit by the handle ends of the beaters. Both rhythm and melody were thrown back and forth in a marvellous way between the two instruments. So much in this piece was both delightful and very surprising.

Five Palindromes by Matthew Clark, one of the University's most accomplished cellists, was performed on vibraphone and marimba by Murray Bartle and Ian Christie. This was, I thought, a wonderfully clean and clear piece. There was more than a little minimalism within it which worked particularly well. There were several wonderfully smooth and kaleidoscopic rhythm changes in the music in its several sections. The piece was a fine example of how so much can be developed out of quite small musical motifs.

Vectors was the final piece in the competition. It was the creation of Geordie Cryle whose specialities are piano and percussion. Peter Ney and Brodie McCash played on just one marimba with Brodie playing the higher register of the instrument and Peter on the lower part often carrying the melody. In a way, the instrument had a kind of pianistic sound in this piece. The percussive influence in the piece was delivered by the use of different beaters in various ways. In his conversation with Dr Cooke, Geordie Cryle described his piece as poly-rhythmic with a deliberately confused texture. I found it much clearer than that in Thursday's performance. Geordie said his inspiration was to do with his difficulty in mathematics. I can beat him in that. I once got three percent in maths because the teacher was standing over me and making me too afraid to write anything at all.

After the performance, there was a short interval while Professor Stollery retired to the back of the Chapel with Margaret Carlaw and Professor Derek Ogston. For once, I had absolutely no idea who could have won the prize. There were multiple reasons to support every one of the entries, but to borrow the famous phrase from the film Highlander, "There can be only One!". Today that one was Scott Bathgate with his piece which brought together vibraphone and viola in such a surprising, imaginative and satisfying way. Fortunately Scott simply congratulated the other composers and did not cut their heads off as happens in the film. Well done Scott, we look forward to hearing your new commission later on.