

# **UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN CONCERT SERIES 2017 – 2018**

**UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN CHORAL SOCIETY**

**AND**

**SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA**

**CHRISTOPHER GRAY: Conductor**

**MHAIRI SHARP: Soprano Soloist**

**SEBASTIAN LIM-SEET: Baritone Soloist**

**BUTCHART RECREATION CENTRE**

**Thursday 30<sup>th</sup> November, 2017**

Thursday's concert in a comfortably warm Butchart Centre offered the best possible refuge from a cold winter's evening – something to warm up both body and soul. It featured two spectacular large scale works. The first was *Tod und Verklärung*, the full scale orchestral tone poem by Richard Strauss. That was followed by a thunderous performance of Carl Orff's popular cantata for choir, soloists and orchestra, *Carmina Burana* – sensational, breathtaking, magnificent.

Actually, I am inclined to agree with the critic Ernest Newman who wrote thus about Strauss's tone poem. "This is music to which one would not want to die. It is too spectacular, too brilliantly lit, too full of pageantry, of a crowd; whereas this is a journey one must make very quietly, and alone."

However taking the work just as pure music without its programmatic elements and looking at Newman's complaints in a more positive light, "spectacular – brilliantly lit – full of pageantry" those are exactly what we got with Thursday's performance by Aberdeen University Symphony Orchestra conducted by Christopher Gray. There was the huge orchestra spread out before us at the end of the Butchart main hall. It looked great and it sounded fantastic. The dark, quite quiet opening of the tone poem soon blossomed out growing in strength. The woodwinds first drew my attention with their fantastic playing, especially the flutes and then there was the magnificent sound of the harp. The brass with the horns in full cry and of course the magnificent strings, smooth, sweeping and spot on as regards intonation. The huge orchestral crescendi were earsplittingly wonderful, I almost began to feel the Butchart begin to shake. My only small criticism was that the two double basses who played very well could have done with another four players in this work.

The famous opening of *Carmina Burana* which has been used in many film scores, adverts and so on was tremendous. Was the orchestra, especially the bass drum too powerful for the chorus? Well perhaps for a moment or two but overall the balance worked well. There were only a few tenors but they came across quite splendidly, I thought. The female chorus was particularly good in their sections. The eight percussionists played the most crucial role in this work, sometimes called upon to be thunderous but often really delicate too – they were absolutely fantastic. There were only two vocal soloists and no boys' choir but this version of the work was still spectacular. Baritone Sebastian Lim-Seet gave us a memorable performance capturing the often teasing spirit of his music with considerable panache and giving his solos a fantastic expressiveness. I enjoyed the performance by soprano Mhairi Sharp. Her final solo was as exciting as could be.

The chorus managed to navigate the ever changing rhythmic changes of the work so well.

Christopher Gray kept them in tandem with the orchestra admirably. The music so full of rhythmic surges and the often jocular spirit of the dance seized me time and again. I often felt like getting up and leaping about with some of the pieces. I'm glad I didn't – it would certainly have finished me off.

This was a concert on a huge scale with an orchestra that was very young and all students as far as I could see – no older bumper uppers. There were a few old stagers in the choir, and nothing wrong with that but again there were so many young performers. This augurs well for music in Aberdeen and possibly well beyond when these people graduate and move on. Lets hope that the University keeps going as it is doing today. When I was a student a long time ago there were so many fewer people available to take part. The staff and students from that time would have been absolutely astonished by Thursday's performance.