

## **CATHEDRAL AT NOON**

**SARAH RIMKUS: Composer & Choral Director**

**CATHEDRAL CHOIR and FRIENDS**

**St ANDREW'S EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL**

**Saturday, 25<sup>th</sup> November, 2017**

Saturday's lunchtime concert of new music by Sarah Rimkus opened with two imaginative arrangements of familiar tunes for soloists and chorus. The first was *At the River*, with its tune known in America as 'Hanson Place' after Hanson Place Baptist Church in Brooklyn where its composer Robert Lowry (1826 – 1899) was Baptist minister. There is an arrangement by Charles Ives and today's new setting by Sarah Rimkus stands proudly alongside that version. The familiar melody was sung first by one soprano soloist later joined by a second soprano in duet. The lovely clean clear soloists were Mhairi Sharp and Hannah Hobson. They were backed by wordless choral chords, very quiet to begin with and then growing in strength until the tenors and finally the full chorus joined the soloists with the words. This captured the sentiments of the music perfectly. It was sung well, and it worked well too.

The second arrangement *Wayfaring Stranger* comes from the American folk and gospel tradition and has been recorded by such artists as Johnny Cash, Emmylou Harris and Eva Cassidy. The soprano soloist was once again supported wordlessly by the choir sounding sometimes like chimes before the baritones joined in the words. I thought the way in which Sarah Rimkus created a special balance between choir and soloists was uniquely imaginative going beyond just having the choir add a wordless hum which is a common choral technique, but Sarah's intertwining of soloists and chorus added to the appeal of the familiar tunes which the audience enjoyed very much.

The main work in the programme was Sarah Rimkus's own *St Andrew's Mass* using contrasting texts in Latin with which I am familiar and Scottish Gaelic with which I am not. As they say 'I do not have the Gaelic'.

Never mind, I will just say how the work sounded to me hearing it for the first time. Echoes of plainchant came across with marked clarity and there were lots of places in the music where the choruses rang out strongly with bell-like sounds. There was a quartet of solo voices, Kathleen Cronie, soprano, Sarah LeBrocq, alto, Sam Paul, tenor and Ross Cumming, bass baritone – all familiar names recognised as some of our finest young singers and musicians.

I was fascinated by the way in which Sarah Rimkus used her soloists. She interwove them with the chorus creating a wonderfully rich tapestry of vocal colour with the solo voices suddenly surfacing like brightly coloured threads shining out from the overall tapestry.

The voices in the *Kyrie* often sounded like chiming bells while the flowing male chorus, here and in the *Gloria* suggested plainsong underlined by Sarah's intelligent use of rhythm.

The *Sanctus* had a kind of undulating or wavering texture, something I have never heard before. How fascinating, how delightful! The *Benedictus*, as with so many other composers, had a particularly delicious gentle melodic quality.

As I wrote in my review of the BBC Singers on Thursday, in my student days and beyond, the commonly held view was that tonal composition was a busted flush. Everything had been done already and probably better. Now composers like Morten Lauridsen, Eric Whitacre and as we heard on Thursday in Aberdeen, Paul Mealor and Phillip Cooke are proving that there are still so many new ways of composing tonally. I think we should add the name of Sarah Rimkus to that list. Her *Mass* had a wonderful polyphonic complexity throughout, challenging yet attractive. Her music was original, fresh, fascinating and above all, attractive. Today's choir and soloists performed what must be rather difficult music outstandingly well. I wonder what it would have sounded like with the BBC Singers? How about that for some time in the future?