

MUSIC IN THE UNIVERSITY: CONCERT SERIES 2017 – 2018
UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN CHAMBER CHOIR

presents:
“SHINING NIGHT”

PROFESSOR PAUL MEALOR: Musical Director
Dr JOHN FREDERICK HUDSON: Associate Conductor
KING’S COLLEGE CHAPEL
Thursday 21st September, 2017

Since Professor Paul Mealor took over the University of Aberdeen Chamber Choir it has grown considerably in size with sixty or so members today. The quality of their singing has blossomed too. Professor Mealor told us that Thursday’s concert was the result of only two rehearsals. That was hard to believe – but possibly not. As an observer, I went to one of Professor Mealor’s rehearsals with Con Anima because they were going to perform new pieces by Morten Lauridsen and I wanted to know what these pieces were like. I was used to singing under certain other conductors who will remain nameless, but the intensity, the grasp of detail and the sheer focus of Mealor’s rehearsal techniques meant that two hours of hard work with him, and he really worked them hard, equalled two or more months of rehearsals with other conductors who tended to faff around quite a bit. Mealor knows what he wants, he knows how to get it and he doesn’t waste a second of rehearsal time. John Frederick Hudson has worked with him and I suspect he manages similarly. The choir members were well chosen too. There were absolutely no passengers, like me for instance, and I was far from being the worst in some other choirs in which I have sung. The choral balance in this choir was terrific – real professional quality in fact.

We were in for a fantastic evening of music on Thursday. The programme itself was astonishingly wide ranging starting with three pieces by superb composers of the late Tudor or early Jacobean Age. There followed two contemporary works whose composers were in the Chapel, one of them singing in the choir, the other in the audience. The final section was a series of Scottish Songs, three of them on the Burns Night CD which raised funds for the people of Ballater whose homes were affected by floods. Two of the songs were specially requested by Prince Charles for a dinner which he was hosting.

The final part of the concert was devoted to an arrangement by John Frederick Hudson of Caledonia by Dougie MacLean and then a traditional song, Tak A Dram arranged by John Frederick Hudson and Raemond Jappy. Wow! What an amazing programme!

O Sing Joyfully is the best known work by Adrian Batten (c1591 – c1637). The word ‘joyfully’ in the title was given full force by the choir. The very opening shout proved the choirs fantastic rich blend that was the trademark of the entire performance. That rich choral blend made me want to get up from my seat and shout hurrah! Fortunately I didn’t.

If Ye Love Me by Thomas Tallis (c1505 – 1585) featured more gentle but no less impressive choral singing with a deliciously smooth blend of voices.

Almighty and Everlasting God by Orlando Gibbons brought out the full span of the choir from richly resonant basses to the delightful soaring soprano line. The singers all seemed to be enjoying the music as much as I was.

The second set of pieces, the contemporary ones, began with Ecce Sacerdos Magnus by Michael Merrill a PhD student and teaching assistant at the University. I was impressed by the different contrapuntal lines in the music, some carrying exciting rhythmic impetus, others attractive melody. I was reminded just a little of Carl Orff although Merrill’s music is fully distinctive on its own terms. Merrill was the composer who was also singing in the choir.

Lux Perpetua by Calum Carswell was receiving its World Première. This was the most challenging piece in the programme. Its harmonies were often astringent yet ethereal too and many of the choral

entries were challenging. John Frederick Hudson kept the music firmly on the road. The result was a mystical and rather seductive work that was given a magnificent performance.

The final work in this part of the programme was modern rather than contemporary. It was one of my all-time favourites, Morten Lauridsen's stunning setting of a delightful poem by James Agee. Its choral chording and free soaring melody are meltingly delicious. Paul Mealor took over the conducting while John Frederick Hudson provided the lovely piano accompaniment.

The first of the Burns' music was not actually by Burns himself. It was *The Immortal Memory* by Thomas LaVoy. LaVoy has managed to write a piece that could easily have been from the age of Burns yet it has tiny musical colourings that make it fully contemporary too.

John Frederick Hudson's arrangement of *Ye Banks and Braes* sounded delightful and it was followed by a rip roaring setting of *Charlie is my darlin'* by Sarah Rimkus.

Dougie MacLean's popular Scottish song *Caledonia* could possibly be thought of as being just a little bit "cheesy" but John Frederick Hudson's arrangement sung with real baritone splendour by Ross Cumming and the chorus transforming it into a splendid artistic triumph. The final item, *Tak a Dram* was fun but there was also something rather moving about it. Once again Ross Cumming was the soloist. If all the other choral singers are as good as him, no wonder the Chamber Choir sounded so fantastic.