

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN CONCERT SERIES 2017 – 2018
UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN CHORAL SOCIETY
MARISCHAL CHAMBER ORCHESTRA
CHRISTOPHER GRAY: Conductor
GRETA ANDRIJAUSKAITE: Piano Soloist (Mozart Concerto)
VOCAL SOLOISTS IN BEETHOVEN CHORAL SYMPHONY:
JUDITH HOWARTH: Soprano (Also soloist in Elysium)
MEGAN R. CORMACK: Mezzo Soprano
DAVID WALSH: Tenor
ROSS CUMMING: Bass Baritone
BUTCHART RECREATION CENTRE
Thursday 22nd March, 2018

There was something momentous about Thursday's concert featuring Marischal Chamber Orchestra along with the full forces of the University of Aberdeen Choral Society. Not only did we have one of Mozart's grandest piano concertos, we had the final movement of Beethoven's Choral Symphony with orchestra and large chorus in full voice and a splendid line up of soloists as required for both works. That was not all however. The concert began with the World Première of a new work, Elysium, which had not one, but four different composers. Was this like the famous Yellow River Concerto which we are led to believe was composed by a committee of different composers in China in 1970? Most probably not. It was an interesting idea though and I would have liked to have had an extensive programme note explaining the origins of this work. It was inspired by Beethoven's Choral Symphony and it did bring together orchestra and chorus in a similar way, although this time with just one soloist, the magnificent Judith Howarth.

Each of its four movements had been created by a different graduate student composer from Aberdeen University Music. The opening Prelude was the work of Mike Merrill, Larghetto was composed by Calum Carswell, the third movement, Joy, by Eoghan Desmond and the final movement, Wings, by Kathryn Rose. I feel that to a great extent they must have collaborated together because the four movements melded together rather beautifully. I should have liked to have had a copy of the text in the programme. It was based on parts of the Friedrich Schiller's poem 'Ode to Joy' which was used by Beethoven although some English phrases were interspersed too. I confess that except for Judith Howarth's lovely clear solo in Kathryn Rose's 'Wings', I could not follow the choir's words at all.

The opening movement, 'Prelude', was for orchestra only. Am I wrong in suggesting that I sensed the influence of Vaughan Williams in this piece? The strings had an attractive broad sweep with woodwinds coming in to add extra colour to the blend. A touch of percussion (cymbals) was added and then brass completed the full mixture.

In the second movement, Larghetto, the chorus was brought in producing a particularly broad and colourful synthesis with the orchestra. There was one moment of particular delight when the glockenspiel spiced up the soprano line giving it a real sparkle. In the next movement 'Joy', I caught the words from the choir more clearly. Rich choral chording was matched subtly with the orchestral mixture and then finally in 'Wings', Judith Howarth's strong clear soprano really did take flight. Without any information in the programme, I felt somewhat confused at a first hearing but I was definitely intrigued and here let me quote something that Sir Thomas Beecham is reputed to have said once, "The English do not really like music that much but they quite like the noise that it makes". I do like music but although I did not fully understand this new piece at a first hearing, "I quite liked the noise that it made!"

I was more on home territory with Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 20, K466. The soloist in this stunningly attractive piece was Greta Andrijauskaite a BMus (Hons) graduate currently studying for the Master of Music in Performing at the University of Aberdeen. The concerto opens with an

extensive and portentous orchestral introduction. I was impressed by Christopher Gray's control over the orchestra in the rather cavernous acoustic of the Butchart main hall. It sounded clean and clear, minimising the effect of echo and providing satisfying support for the piano.

Greta's playing had superb freedom and fluency in the right hand while in the left, which carries much of the rhythm of the music, she gave it a very attractive bounce matching the sense of restlessness which Mozart wanted in the first movement. I wonder which cadenza she used. There is one by Brahms. Was this it? We were not told. In any case I thought Greta played it not just with real style but with considerable emotional depth too.

The very extensive second movement could almost be a concerto in its own right which is possibly why the audience applauded at the end. Its opening section is lyrical and romantic and Greta played it with real depth of feeling. In the middle, a storm sets in and the music becomes quite agitated.

Here again, Greta's rhythmic pulse was delivered with bounce in the left hand. Towards the end, the lyrical opening returned, leading to a delicately played conclusion.

The final Rondo finale was bright, bouncy yes and merry – a real delight.

The vocal soloists were soon in their places and we were off with the explosive orchestral opening of the final movement of Beethoven's Symphony No. 9, Op.125. The cellos and basses sounded a bit rough here perhaps but it was a wonderfully spirited sound that probably captured more than a little of the in your face astonishment which the very first audience of this work perhaps experienced. The orchestral playing was always bursting with vigour and very exciting.

Baritone soloist Ross Cumming came in magnificently with his opening words, not all of which are from Schiller's poem: 'O freunde, nicht diese töne'. Ross's singing was so rich and powerful. I was impressed. In his solo backed by a military sounding orchestra, tenor David Walsh was impressive too. Mezzo Megan Cormack filled out the ensemble singing nicely and then Judith Howarth soared radiantly and unstoppable above soloists, choir and orchestra. The choral singing burned with enthusiasm. I caught all their words here but then I knew them well already.

Christopher Gray made sure all his performers would capture the indefatigable spirit of Beethoven's music. It was not a perfect performance but it was a thrilling, exciting and fiery one which all the students taking part will surely remember well into the future. Well done!