

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN CONCERT SERIES 2017 – 2018
PERCUSSION FESTIVAL
MARACA2 PERCUSSION DUO: TIM PALMER & JASON HUXTABLE
BUTCHART HALL
Thursday 15th February, 2018

Aberdeen University Music is currently running a short Percussion Festival. One of the world's finest percussion ensembles, Maraca2 are our guests as both performers and tutors. They are offering master classes to our percussion students as well as giving hugely enjoyable performances, the first of which took place on Thursday evening. The Duo were introduced by Dr Lisa Nicol the University's gifted percussion tutor. She also, along with many of her students, took part in some of the items on Thursday's programme. At one point in the evening though, as an introduction to the second item in the programme which employed minimalist techniques, Maraca2 succeeded in getting all audience members, not just the percussionists, involved in a short performance inspired in a very basic way by Steve Reich's Clapping Music. The audience was divided into two halves so that even Professor Ogston, myself and Dione Macmorran were turned into enthusiastic performers instead of our usual roles as just passive observers. We all thought it was great fun and enjoyed taking part.

For those who imagine that a percussion concert is just some guy banging away at a drum, Thursday's concert was a real eye opener. Percussion offers a vastly wider scope of musical experience and Maraca2 were ample proof of that. They opened their performance with a very well known work by Chopin. Chopin? Did he compose percussion music? Well not really, but Tim Palmer and Jason Huxtable gave us a totally kosher performance arranged originally by the Safri Duo (a contemporary Danish Percussion Duo) of Chopin's Fantasia Impromptu in c# minor. The original lines of piano music shone through beautifully on two marimbas. The famous central melody which some may recall became a popular tune under the title of 'I'm Always Chasing Rainbows' was sounded out deliciously on vibraphone.

Following on from our fun moment of audience participation the Duo performed 42nd Street Rondo by Wayne Siegel an American composer currently working in Denmark. This was the work that had minimalist form and the rhythms created by the two percussionists were ever changing and developing perhaps like a musical version of fractals.

Butsu Mutandari, a traditional piece from Zimbabwe, brought the large University of Aberdeen Percussion Ensemble led by Dr Lisa Nicol together with the Maraca2 Duo. One of the girls kicked off the performance on marimba and she was gradually joined by others until the sound they generated reminded me of a steel band. Later, a row of African drums was added to the sound and I was reminded of the film 'Sanders of the River', yes, I really am that old. The music rose to a magnificent crescendo and then one by one the performers left the stage until only one marimba player was left. All right, the sound was totally different but I was reminded of a performance of Haydn's 'Farewell Symphony' I once saw at the Edinburgh Festival. So don't tell me that all percussion music is just the same!

Ameline by the French born composer and percussionist had the floating rhythms and gently developing melody of soft French jazz. It brought together through composed music with improvisation on vibraphone.

For full blown improvisation, the University of Aberdeen Percussion Ensemble and Dr Lisa Nicol were back in a special piece which began with bowed vibraphone and ended with a softly dying sound on vibraphone. The hallmark of a fine improvised piece of music is that it should not really sound improvised at all. This was achieved as one performer would bring in a new rhythm or melodic idea which would be taken up by other members of the ensemble. Some of the sudden interruptions sounded surprising but deliberate. I was impressed by the way in which the performers seemed to be able to read one another's minds so that although the music was not written down and

was very much impromptu it had form and shape and made good sense musically. Maraca2 had obviously worked hard with the students and this showed up in the performance.

The final piece in the concert Blue Motion was by Stephen Whibley, a percussionist and composer from Manchester who currently works with the BBC Concert Orchestra in London. It was melodically complex becoming more overtly minimalist towards the end. It was jazzy in the sort of way that Leonard Bernstein would have delightedly called 'funky'. I enjoyed it thoroughly.

On my way back to the car after the concert I asked one small boy who had been at the concert what he had enjoyed most. He said Butsu Mutandari and the Improvisation. I can't really disagree because personally I enjoyed everything. The whole concert had a sense of fun and enjoyment that came through from all of the performers. I look forward to the next performance tomorrow!