

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN CONCERT SERIES 2017 – 2018
REDISCOVERIES 9 – SERG/sonADA
BELMONT FILMHOUSE CAFÉ – BASEMENT
Thursday 22nd February, 2018

Rediscoveries 9, the ninth concert co-curated by SERG (Sound Emporium Research Group) from the Department of Music in the University of Aberdeen was presented in association with sonADA, an Aberdeen based sonic arts and experimental performance collective dedicated to promoting new works by Aberdeen and Scottish composers. Thursday's concert was part of a three day Sonic Arts Festival, running from 22nd to 24th February, highlighting experimental music, sound art, performance and sound installations in the North East of Scotland. The concert was compèred by Suk-Jun Kim. The first piece I heard, entitled Gobon, was created by Prentice Robertson. He informed us that his piece was focused on percussion. Light-fingered drum taps were moved hither and thither across the entire listening space. Gradually, more metallic sounds were brought in also moving round the space and the music grew until it made me think of the sound equivalent of a thrilling firework display. I do not mean that the sounds were anything like those made by fireworks but rather that the sense of colour and spectacle were there in Prentice Robertson's sound world. The piece was in several contrasting sections becoming at one point rather mysterious as if from outer space. This led to a huge sonic climax before echoes of the opening returned giving a sense of structure to the music.

The following work was an audio visual work by Lee Hentze. Initially it was somewhat mystifying but as it continued I began to settle into its world. The visuals included a little boy sitting at the edge of the screen. Was he looking at us, at the sky or somewhere else? The sky itself was important and it revolved constantly round the centre of the picture. The sounds themselves also promoted sensations of revolving. At one point the theme from The Magic Roundabout was heard almost subliminally. This too suggested the feeling of turning round and round and of course the roundabout suggested the world of the young child. It was a fascinating and enigmatic piece that encouraged one's mind to open up to so many astonishing possibilities.

Bea Dunsmore's two pieces were very much abstract but full of an astonishing range of sound colours. To begin with there was something that suggested a celluloid ball (like a ping pong ball) launched into a glass receptacle. These sounds were developed in a way in which rhythm was married spectacularly with the sound colours. There were voices too and the sense of movement round the listening space was also impressive.

Mark Dunsmore's piece was called Where I am and he told us it was inspired by sounds in his own home. The sounds were special to him and he would have known what they meant but the changes which he had subjected them to suggested that he must have lived in the Paris Underground. There were what sounded like vehicular hums, cupboards opening or closing, liquids poured and a typewriter perhaps. Other peoples homes are always surprising as well as fascinating.

Lise Olsen comes from Dundee. Her piece was from what is known as 'ambisonics' - a system of sound reproduction that uses a combination of channels and speakers to surround the listener with sounds from many different sources. Lise's sound sources were largely voices of people ranging in age from five years old to over ninety, recorded in a museum. They were fragmented but fascinating. The music was shaped using repetition and a small degree of sonic change. At one point there was even a children's choir. I really enjoyed this piece. It reminded me of my early days before we got television in Aberdeen. Sounds of conversation on radio would allow me to create pictures in my own mind. Are today's youngsters still able to do that?

Paul Hynes piece was called Fruit Salad. Its sound source was a fruit bowl made to ring out in different ways. It was a percussive piece, very abstract – an example of the seemingly limitless sound changes that can be drawn from one simple source. Despite the wide range of timbres and rhythms they were given a sense of kindred spirit as a result of where they came from. This gave the piece its special sense of shape and structure.

After a short interval a Duo group of husband and wife, Mark and Bea Dunsmore gave us a wide variety of music that filled the entire second half. To begin with, a series of tolling bell-like sounds were expanded and altered ending up in little tings and then breathy sounds.

Subcontext used garbled voices. Is this what English sounds like to people who can't speak English? Or does it remove the meaning from spoken words leaving just their bare sound effects, in other words their pure musicality.

There followed a most amazing piece in which the music was performed absolutely live including sources and electronic alterations. Mark and then Bea played a Japanese koto with a chordal background on a synth. It was when Bea took over the koto that the Japanese flavour of the music really shone through. Overall it was an impressively orchestral piece.

Their audiovisual piece used traffic sounds, at first realistic (possibly), then becoming purely and powerfully musical in a similar way to the use of the voices earlier in the programme. The visuals showed very busy traffic scenes switching from night to daylight in the most amazing way.

Frozen Fields started with birdsong and planes overhead expanding, developing and then morphing to a climax before gradually dying away again.

The Duo's final piece, much shorter, sparkled with a great variety of sonic colour. It provided a splendid conclusion to an amazingly mind expanding concert. In writing about all these different pieces I worry that my words and my own impressions of the music tend to solidify a performance that was amazingly fluid or should I even say ethereal. On my way back to the car in the Denburn, I felt that music is something that is always around us, as long as we have the ears to hear and the receptiveness to run with it.