

MUSIC IN THE UNIVERSITY: CONCERT SERIES 2017 – 2018
O RADIANT DAWN:
SPECTRUM NEW MUSIC ENSEMBLE with
THE UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN CHAMBER CHOIR
KING'S COLLEGE CHAPEL
Thursday 16th November, 2017

Spectrum New Music Ensemble presented their most outstanding concert to date on Thursday. There were multiple justifications for saying that. The first was that the programme included a wide range of the music, chamber and choral, of Scotland's pre-eminent composer James MacMillan who was present in the Chapel to introduce his music and to enjoy the performances. This was bound to raise standards and indeed it did. The second was the inclusion in the programme of the World Premiere of a piece by the winner of the Carlaw/Ogston Composition Prize 2017, Jennifer Taylor. The opportunity of hearing the first performance of her new work specially commissioned for the event being a major part of her prize. The third reason was the inclusion in the line up of performers of the lavish sounding University Chamber Choir currently at the very top of their form. The importance of this event attracted several of the University's top musicians to take part. Along with Kathleen Cronie, the Chamber Choir's director, John Frederick Hudson and Paul Mealor both appeared as conductors and Ben Marsden a regular repetiteur for the University was the pianist in many of the performances.

Philip Cooke introduced the event and prompted James MacMillan to discuss the background and the formats of his works. The first of these were two settings for soprano and piano of poems by the Perth poet William Soutar (1898 – 1943). The Tryst or just Scots Song was composed in 1991 and Ballad in 1994. James MacMillan told us that he wanted to write melodies that sounded like early traditional Scots tunes to match the Scots words of the texts. I felt that he had succeeded magnificently in this. The two sopranos Lisa Johnston and Eilidh Thomson sang beautifully – purely and soaringly. The piano accompaniments played most delicately by Ben Marsden were properly sparse and clean matching the spirit of the songs bewitchingly.

The two young sopranos were the star vocalists in the next work, Jennifer Taylor's piece dealing with the Massacre of Glencoe. She had worked with a professor of Gaelic in finding and editing a poem written around the time of the events. Along with the vocalists there were two percussionists, Peter Ney and Brodie McCash; a small string group, Katie Taylor, violin, Saskia Mucke, viola and Matthew Clark, cello. Ben Marsden was the pianist and a special surprise at the end of the piece was provided by an offstage fiddle player, Shannon Stevenson.

Shimmering strings and from the percussion, bowed marimba notes and little bells suggested the winter landscapes and later rapping drums suggested the threats of the military who carried out the massacre. At the end of the piece the offstage fiddle suggested the lamentations surrounding memories of the events. The two sopranos gave us the human expanses of the work. It was fascinating, wonderfully imaginative, and emotionally engaging. Following the performance Philip Cooke invited Margaret Carlaw and Derek Ogston to present Jennifer Taylor with an attractive bouquet and an envelope containing the rest of her prize.

The members of the Chamber Choir, actually a very large choir conducted by John Frederick Hudson provided a rich warm vocal background to the three soprano soloists, Cassandra Humble, Mhairi Sharp and Jennifer Taylor in James MacMillan's delectable setting of the Robert Burns song The Gallant Weaver. I loved the way in which the various sections of the choir passed the words 'I love the Gallant Weaver' across the full chorus.

After a short intermission, Katie Taylor and Ben Marsden performed what MacMillan described as a love duet for violin and piano. The violin began with trills and a sliding motif reminiscent of the viola part in Berlioz's Harold in Italy. Soon the violin opens up melodically while the piano takes on the trills. It was a splendidly well shaped piece.

Matthew Clark played the cello part in the four short movements from Northern Skies. These short pieces were very attractive and compelling with Ben Marsden covering the more dramatic and virtuoso piano score.

The final work in the programme was a magnificent choral setting entitled O Radiant Dawn one of MacMillan's Strathclyde Motets. With the choir conducted by Paul Mealar it was lustrous, resplendent with magnificent singing by the Chamber Choir. This was the music I could hear as I approached the Chapel early. Wow, I thought. That sounds great. The final performance was even better – MacMillan at his very best. You just don't get much better than that!