“FRENEMIES” - the title of Thursday’s concert featuring The Aberdeen Early Music Collective is a portmanteau word bringing together the idea of friends and enemies. Thursday’s performance provided an opportunity to explore the music of some less well known composers of the Baroque era who were either friends or opponents, sometimes both, of Georg Friedrich Händel - to give his name its original German spelling as in today’s programme. An example of friendship between two composers is found in one of Handel’s letters to Georg Philipp Telemann regarding a second consignment of exotic garden plants which he was sending to Telemann whose consuming interest after music was gardening. The captain of the ship carrying the original consignment had been told wrongly that Telemann had died so he had tossed the plants overboard. In this second letter Handel expressed pleasure in hearing that Telemann was still living and in good health. Johann Mattheson was for most of his life a close friend of Handel but on one occasion during a performance of Mattheson’s opera Cleopatra in 1704, Mattheson was on stage singing and Handel was playing harpsichord continuo in the pit. After his singing role was over, Mattheson came down into the pit and demanded to take over at the harpsichord. Handel refused and a heated argument ensued. Mattheson finally drew his sword and attempted to stab Handel who was apparently saved from injury by a large button on his tunic.

These were just two of the fascinating facts told in the form of dramatised dialogues between Frauke Jürgensen and Amanda Babington interspersed between the six pieces in the programme all surrounding the composer Handel, his friends and opponents. I took away two especially interesting facts from this performance namely that like me, Telemann was interested in gardening and that Handel was over six feet tall.

The musical part of the performance began with a piece for organ composed by Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg (1718 – 1795). It was played with magnificent style on the Aubertin organ by Professor David Smith. It was the Fughe e capricci per Clavicembalo ò per l’Organo which began with a Preludio followed by the fugal Capriccio. This was a work very much based on arpeggio-style motifs. It sounded fresh, bracing and clean – a splendid bright opening to the performance.

The second work was a Sinfonia da camera in B flat, Op.2, no.1 by Nicola Porpora (1686 – 1768). It featured all the instrumentalists in the Collective – two violins, cello and harpsichord. Joyful imitative counterpoint was shared among all the instruments but especially the strings. The work ended with two instrumental Arias, the first in the
major played by Amanda Babington, the second in the minor by Huw Daniels before the two violins came together in a delightful finale.
The music of Johann Mattheson (1681 – 1768) was represented by two works for recorders played by Amanda Babington and Professor David Smith. These were the three movements of Sonata in d for flutes, Op.1, no.1 and the five movements of the Sonata in F for flutes Op.1, no.2. The faster movements of the first and the dance based movements of the second came across particularly well especially the Gigue in the Sonata in F in which the playing was splendidly lively and animated.
Between these two pieces by Mattheson sat the very attractive Cello Sonata in D, TWV 41:D6 by Telemann. Claire Babington’s rich cello tone came through beautifully in the slow movements, Lento and Largo. The first Allegro featured muscular ornate music while the second demonstrated Claire’s mastery of demanding fingerboard work - athletic and often with large leaps.
Scarlatti’s Sonata K. 89 was originally a keyboard piece but today it was played by Amanda, Claire and David in an arrangement for violin, cello and harpsichord. In the central slow movement, Grave, the harpsichord was well to the fore with the solo violin almost in an accompanying role. In the finale, the music for all three instruments sizzled with excitement especially the scrunchy harpsichord playing, making for a memorable performance.
Since Handel occupied the centre around which the other composers were in orbit, it was apposite that the final piece should be a thoroughly amazing work by that same composer. This was a Gloria for soprano with two violins, cello and harpsichord bringing all five performers together. The vocal part was sung daringly by Frauke Jürgensen. It was the most technically demanding vocal music - quite challenging for any singer I would have thought. It began with the Gloria in Excelsis Deo in which the vocal writing was terrifyingly florid. Frauke achieved an amazing level of vocal complexity. The trills especially were amazing. The Domine Deus for voice with cello and harpsichord was more relaxed and the finale Quonium tu solus Sanctus had a jaunty feel about it in which all five excellent musicians participated with admirable force and enthusiasm.