MUSIC IN THE UNIVERSITY CONCERT SERIES 2016 – 2017
MARISCHAL CHAMBER ORCHESTRA

CHRIS GRAY: Conductor
CARLY MILLS: Piano Soloist, Beethoven Piano Concerto No. 3

BUTCHART CENTRE
Sunday 12th March, 2017

It was great to see Chris Gray back in charge of the Marischal Chamber Orchestra. He has done so much to raise the quality of the playing, especially the strings who were sounding clean, transparent and glossy throughout a particularly appealing programme.

It began with a piece composed especially for strings. It was Start Point: Four tunes from the Scottish Island of Sanday by Sir Peter Maxwell Davies. Maxwell Davies is a composer who used a wide range of compositional styles and Start Point, as its full title suggests, comes from that group of his works which derive their inspiration from the traditional music of Orkney and its surrounding Islands. Chris Gray told us that he had worked on this very music with Maxwell Davies and tonight’s performance was in a sense an affectionate tribute to the memory of the composer. It was composed for the Sanday Fiddle Club, a mixed level group of community players so the music is tuneful, relatively simple and intended primarily for enjoyment. I think that is true and it seemed to me that last night’s performance was enjoyed every bit as much by the orchestra players as by the audience.

The first movement, entitled Start Point, was an attractive toe tapping Scottish tune that made everyone happy. The second movement Graveshill was much slower. Although once again in traditional mood it had some interesting harmonic and melodic turns that marked it as the work of a more advanced compositional talent.

The third movement, Cross Kirk had rich deep playing from the cellos and basses and in the finale, Backaskaill March, the tunes were carried by the first violins while the rest of the orchestra played pizzicato. At the end of the movement the whole orchestra played pizzicato in a rather delightful final flourish.

The rest of the concert was more demanding. The wind and percussion players soon filed in to join the orchestra in two hugely popular works by Beethoven. After the orchestra had settled into their places our glamorous piano soloist Carly Mills took her place at the piano for Beethoven’s Third Piano Concerto.

In some concerti the piano and orchestra are set against one another in a kind of musical combat to see which one emerges victorious. Beethoven’s Third is totally different. In this work orchestra and piano co-operate in a friendly discussion, pushing the music onward in a to and fro manner, with sometimes the orchestra introducing a theme to which the piano responds, and sometimes the other way round with the piano taking the lead and the orchestra responding. I thought both the soloist and the orchestra did rather splendidly making the music flow seamlessly forward in each of the three movements. In the opening Allegro con brio the orchestra has an extensive introduction with emphatic highly coloured and often dramatic playing. The piano responded adding more than a touch of ornamental playing. Carly Mills playing covered that with considerable cleanliness and clarity and variations in touch and dynamics were well thought out with playing that matched the varied colouring of Beethoven’s orchestral writing. There was a splendid wholeness or oneness in both piano and orchestra that made sense of the music.

The piano opens the second movement, Largo in which Carly Mills made her part sing out quite splendidly on the University Steinway grand.

The finale is lively and somehow very good humoured, something in which both Carly and the orchestra excelled throwing musical ideas back and forth between them in the most delightful way. Can I mention James Aburn’s clarinet playing in this movement – really delightful.
After the interval came another of Beethoven’s most attractive works, his Symphony No 6 in F Major Op. 68 better known as the Pastoral Symphony. Tom Service writing in the Guardian in 2014 describes this piece as, “A sentimental romp through the Viennese countryside, a programmatic sideline to the central sweep of Beethoven’s development…” Service goes on to say that this Symphony is not a sideline at all but rather a work that extends the grasp of the symphony into new worlds of musical experience. It was this work above all that gave composers like Berlioz or Mahler the precedent that allowed them to compose in the way they wished.

If we take the words romp, sentimental and countryside all of these were there in abundance in Sunday’s most colourful performance. The opening movement had wonderful throbbing heartbeat rhythms from the strings and the woodwind choir projected a feeling of jollity emanating especially from the oboe and the gorgeous playing of the flutes. In the second movement, Scene by the brook, the muted strings suggested dappled shade, coolness and calm with the woodwind creating the bird calls which you would only hear if all else was still. Beethoven then takes us to a clearing in the woods where the country folk are having their dance to a jolly village band which Beethoven recreates using oboe answered almost comically by the bassoon then clarinet and horns filling out the music.

The storm is set off by the shuddering basses then the excellent timpanist gave us the proper thwacks for the thunderbolts. At last the sky clears and the sunshine comes through in the lovely melody sung by the strings in the finale. It was a delightful full colour performance from Chris Gray and his splendid orchestra.

I remember reading about Beethoven’s strolls through the Viennese woods. Apparently he would sing out loud and conduct as he walked. The local young boys thinking he was mad would throw stones at him. I presume that on this particular stroll the boys were all safely in school and the composer was able to enjoy his stroll unimpeded.