The 2017 Carlaw | Ogston Composition Award offers £1,000 to the winner as a commission for a larger scale new work which will be performed at a Spectrum Concert next season. Thursday’s competition was introduced by Sarah Rimkus, Artistic Director of Aberdeen University’s Spectrum New Music Ensemble. Sarah is herself an award-winning composer of vocal, choral and chamber music. She introduced each of the five young composers whose music was about to be performed by members of Spectrum. The six young performers from University Music were outstanding. I believe that their performances alone made Thursday’s concert one of the best ever, quite apart from the quality of the five new works each one of which had something really special going for it.

The first young composer James Aburn, a particularly fine clarinettist, had scored his new work entitled Disruptions around F for piano solo. It was given a clean and carefully considered performance by William Gray. It was in three parts I. The Abstraction, II. The Row Sketches III. The Realisation. The opening movement displayed a fine balance between tonal piano music with an almost pastoral feel coloured by more advanced harmonies and turns of melodic writing. This set up a kind of tension between tonal and atonal writing leading into the second movement which explored a twelve tone row divided into three groups of four notes which were tantalisingly explored. In the final movement more luscious tonal harmonies shone through and the piece ended by allowing the tonal side to win through. I found this a fascinating exploration of two musical worlds bound up in particularly clean and clear piano writing well played by William Gray.

The second composer introduced by Sarah Rimkus was Anna McClure whose piece entitled Last night I dreamed, was a most unusual setting of an intriguing and alluring poem by C. S. Lewis. Soprano Mhairi Sharp was accompanied on marimba by Ian Christie. I did find a couple of works for voice and marimba one by Lynn Glassock from Texas (He is a man) and another by Douglas Ovens from California so Anna McClure’s piece is not quite unique but it is unusual and I found her combination a fascinating one. It was made even more so by Mhairi Sharp’s stunningly impressive singing, pure, fresh with impeccable diction and real depth of feeling in her delivery of a fascinating text. Ian Christie’s playing added an amazing breadth of colour to the music. This was a piece that I will not easily forget.

The next piece was also for soprano and therefore also got a stunningly professional performance from Mhairi Sharp. This time she was twinned, rather than just accompanied by pianist Andrew Fowler. I have heard him develop his talent over the years and he has become truly impressive. Memoriam was composed by Calum Carswell and was in three parts, I. Beside a Humble Stone, II. I cannot Go and III. Absence, Me. Calum had taken his texts from three very different writers, Tracy Smith, Paul Verlaine and Emily Brontë. The subject of the verse compilation had certain resonances with the poem by Anna McClure but here it was colder and darker, there was no warmth and light, no lamp with its rosy light. This was a cemetery in winter and the music was darker too. The piano part was often separate from the voice and it created a special sense of atmosphere that chimed with the words of the text. Rhythm and drama were important here and there was something almost cinematic about this piece.
Andrew Fowler was also the piano player in the next piece (H)our Zero for cello and piano in which the composer Matthew Clark was the only one to also perform in his own piece. This also explored the world of twelve note composition this time using three sets of four notes in its structure. I thought that structure was something that made this piece particularly successful. The opening moments had harmonics played on cello with repeated single notes on the piano and this was also how the work ended with much variety in between. I thought the writing for piano and cello worked spectacularly well for instance when a sustained note on cello was mirrored by a piano trill – over all a cleverly structured piece.

The final piece in the competition was entitled Delirious, a marimba solo, composed by fourth year student Jennifer Taylor and performed brilliantly by Brodie McCash. What made this piece particularly special was the way in which it was so well suited to its chosen instrument. This was a virtuoso marimba solo pure and simple and nothing else. The judges of the Competition must have thought so too because Delirious by Jennifer Taylor was the winner of the 2017 Carlaw | Ogston Composition Award. Someone has to be declared a winner but the other four composers should not be disappointed and every one of their works had something particularly special to recommend it which I hope I have made clear. Above all, keep on composing, you have all a great deal to offer those of us who only go to concerts just to listen, and after all, we matter too.