

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN CONCERT SERIES 2018 – 2019
ORGAN RECITAL BY PROFESSOR DAVID J. SMITH
KING'S COLLEGE CHAPEL
Thursday 27th September, 2018

Professor David J. Smith needs no introduction to Aberdeen audiences. For many years he was on the staff of Aberdeen University Music where he was for a time, Head of Department. David has given many organ recitals over the years featuring his speciality of improvisation. A member of the Aberdeen and District Organists' Association, he presented a special seminar for members on the Art of Improvisation. Recently however he has left Aberdeen to become a Founding Head of Music at the University of Northumbria. We wish him well and we were delighted that he was able to come back to King's College Chapel for a special recital on Thursday.

He opened the recital with the Fantasia in c minor BWV 562 by J. S. Bach. The theme opens with a delightful ornamented note that grabs the attention every time it recurs throughout the piece. As one expects with Bach, the complexities of counterpoint were thrilling and David Smith gave those their full marvellous value in his performance. The accompanying fugue added, I believe, later in Bach's career remained unfinished so David Smith decided instead to use a theme by Handel on which he improvised a fugue. It began unsurprisingly and with strong pedals but then suddenly it careered into a series of dizzying descending whirlwinds of surprising harmonies. This was absolutely wonderful and it has to be said amazingly humorous too. It certainly raised my spirits.

To follow was the Suite du Premier Ton by a near contemporary of Bach, the French composer Louis-Nicolas Clérambault. Being a member of the French organ school, his music is very different to that of Bach and indeed is, as David Smith commented, particularly suited to the unique voice palette of our Aubertin Organ. The selection of sounds that David Smith chose for this music were very edgy often using what the French call 'anches' or reeds – stops like the 'cromorne' or 'cornet' that are at the core of early music consorts.

The opening movement 'Grand plein Jeu' was slow and rather noble. The following 'Fugue' was a slightly quirky and edgy clarion call. The 'Duo' had very lively counterpoint and with its flutes the 'Trio' was deliciously happy and jaunty. The following two movements have very long instructions for the use of different 'early' instruments. They are both described as 'en Dialogue' and that is exactly what came across magnificently in David Smith's performance. They had instrumental groups calling to one another in an almost orchestral way but with quite edgy and exciting sound blends.

The final movement entitled 'Dialogue sur les grands jeux' began rich and roaring and developed magnificently in fullness of sound.

I remember some years ago when David Smith gave a recital that included organ music by Mendelssohn. I remember saying at the time, "This will never work on this instrument". But it did. In fact it was marvellous and so it was again today. It was Mendelssohn's Sonata IV and the opening movement Allegro con brio was rich sounding with almost martial rhythms and splendid pedal playing.

The Andante religioso was like a slow march with lovely flutes on top of the blend. I loved the blend that David Smith used for the main melody in the Allegretto which sang out above rippling flutes.

The final movement, Allegro maestoso e vivace was fulsome, joyful and celebratory – a real outburst of organ festivity.

To conclude his recital, David gave us one of his special improvisations. There was a suggestion of the French school in the titles of the five sections of the improvisation. 'Plein Jeu' combined older sounds with more contemporary flavours. 'Duo' had playful flute sounds. The 'Scherzo' was light and dance inspired. The 'Trio' was attractive and the improvisation ended with a strong bold 'Toccata' rich, ringing and rather magnificent.

As we say in the North East since David has moved south and no longer works here, “Hast ye back!”