This season’s concert series opened on the 16th September 2016 with a performance by the wind players of McOpera one of the University’s current Artists in Residence. The second half of the season at the beginning of a new year also got underway with five of McOpera’s wind players this time also including a welcome return visit to the University by piano virtuoso James Willshire. He was last here on 1st October, 2015 when he played music by Ginastera, Debussy and a marvellously colourful performance of Mussorgsky’s Pictures at an Exhibition.

Today, he was performing in tandem with McOpera’s wind players in Mozart’s Quintet for Piano and Winds in E-flat Major, K.452 followed by a very different work, Poulenc’s Sextet for Piano and Winds.

The role of the piano is very different in the two works. In Mozart’s Quintet the piano often introduces the themes which are then expounded upon by the wind players often with a suggestion of variations. In Mozart’s work there is no flute, the wind choir consisting of oboe and clarinet, bassoon and horn. Sometimes the piano took on the role of accompanist to the wind players and James Willshire’s wonderfully liquid fingering added a special sense of freedom and lightness to the performance. The opening movement begins Largo with quite dramatic chords reminiscent of some of the composer’s dramatic operatic writing. I loved the way that themes or fragments were passed from instrument to instrument along the line of wind players often sparked off by a statement on piano. What made this work so well was the sense of balance achieved by all the players. Oboe or clarinet would surface for a moment before passing on to bassoon or horn. It made the colours of the music shine forth brilliantly in this music all bound together with a finely honed sense of forward motion in the opening movement.

The melodic charm of the second movement was captured nicely by all the players and the Rondo finale set off again by the piano was bright and lively. It would be wrong to settle on any of the players for mention but I will break the rules by making particular mention of the oboe and clarinet. I thought they were just great.

Mozart’s music had a relaxed warmth and charm but the opening of Poulenc’s Sextet in which the flute was added to the line-up of winds was almost like a splash of cold water right in the face – surprising, yet refreshing too.

I do not know who wrote the programme notes for this concert but I thought they were excellent particularly with regard to the Poulenc Sextet. I could almost just copy those notes as a review because they encapsulated everything that we heard in Thursday evening’s performance. “Rickytick jazziness – near-teary songfulness – kick-in-the-pants comic relief – surprisingly wistful ending – ragtime buffoonery – biting satire …. yes all of these were given full force in Thursday’s marvellously lively and entrancing performance.

In Poulenc’s Sextet, the piano part is more thoroughly intertwined in the music unlike in Mozart’s Quintet where at times the sense of a piano concerto though never fully explored is at least distantly suggested in Mozart’s writing.

The programme note for Poulenc’s Sextet refers to the composer’s inspirations including the music hall, the boulevard cafés, the circus and the streets of Paris. I’m sure all that is true but I wonder
whether Poulenc was also inspired by films. The Sextet was completed in 1932 and the first sound cartoon films were released in 1928. Even if Poulenc had not seen these he would surely have been aware of the techniques of montage in films introduced by Eisenstein. I feel there is a sense of musical montage in Poulenc’s music where abrupt changes in mood take place. I could of course be wrong. Maybe Poulenc never went to the cinema. Perhaps some of our students could find out? Anyway, I thought this was a great piece and a fantastic performance – thank you so much James Willshire, McOpera and University music.