Classical Music in the twentieth century took a path radically different from what had gone before. There were many reasons for that. Two horrific world wars, the Holocaust or simply the rise of the scientific method meant that composers felt they could no longer trust the world of emotions. Their meaning could not be pinned down in any precise or reliable way. There was also something that was said to me by the late Roderick Lakin MBE when we were both students. He rose to become a major figure in Arts Administration: “Western classical music ended with Richard Strauss – but what an end!” Melodies and harmonies that appealed to the emotions were left to the world of popular or pop music. Many classical composers did not want to or possibly were unable to encroach on that territory. There were still some who did and now composers like Morten Lauridsen have proved that the world of tonal melody and harmony is a seam that is still capable of being mined for many riches. His influence has been important in the lives of several composers working at Aberdeen University. I am thinking about Paul Mealor and Phillip Cooke for instance. Lauridsen’s choral writing has been especially rich in music that appeals to the heart as well as just to the mind and it was great that SOUND should have joined forces with Aberdeen University music where Professor Morten Lauridsen has just spent a week as composer in residence. He had worked with Paul Mealor and the University Chamber Choir in preparing four of his very finest choral works which we were about to hear in King’s College Chapel. This had paid huge dividends because I cannot remember the choir giving a performance of such pristine clarity and perfection. There was a special bonus that the three accompanied pieces had the composer himself at the piano.

In his earlier concert on Wednesday evening Morten Lauridsen told us about the importance of poetry in his life. In fifty years as a lecturer in California he has always begun by reading a poem to his students. He read all four of the texts, two in English translation before the performances of his works. His deep respect for the works of these poets came through in the way he had set the words. In the two outer pieces, Prayer, with a text by Dana Gioia and Sure on this Shining Night, a setting of words by James Agee, Lauridsen sets the words for unison male voices particularly the tenors in the middle of their range so that the poets’ words come through with exceptional clarity. The perfectly seamless singing of the Chamber Choir also helped enormously. When we have got the words in out heads, Lauridsen allows himself the opportunity of writing a richer choral blend. His melodies and harmonies are able to reach our emotions in a wonderfully direct way. Choral crescendos are beautiful like a speeded up film of a beautiful rose opening up on a screen.
In the first piece, Prayer, the emotions of a father grieving for a lost child came across with startling directness, Lauridsen’s music adding poignancy to Dana Gioia’s words without altering them or getting in their way.

O Nata Lux from a longer work, Lux Aeterna was sung perfectly by the unaccompanied choir with Paul Mealor making sure that every detail came through with crystal clarity.

The first of two songs from Nocturnes, Sa Nuit d’Été with French words by Ranier Maria Rilke had a piano accompaniment that expanded in more brittle melodic directions but this made the consonant ending all the more effective.

How am I going to write about the final piece in the concert, Sure on this Shining Night, one of my favourites in all music? As we were leaving the Chapel, Margaret Carlaw said that this would be one of the easiest reviews I had to write. Well, not really, because with this piece, no superlative is anywhere near good enough - so that comment will simply have to suffice. The poetry, the musical setting and the performance were as perfect as it is possible to be in our imperfect world.