The celebrated American composer Morten Lauridsen, currently guest composer in residence at Aberdeen University Music, was making his seventh visit to Aberdeen on Wednesday evening. He was introduced to a full house audience by the current Artistic Director of Spectrum New Music Ensemble, composer Sarah Rimkus who was a past pupil of Lauridsen back in California.

It was particularly good to have Lauridsen introduce each of the three works from his varied repertoire and to have him explain the background and some of the structural elements of the pieces we were about to hear. We have been used in the past to hearing some of his choral and vocal works which have been deliciously consonant and immediately attractive. His setting of James Agee’s poem, Sure on this Shining Night, is one of my all time favourites. Lauridsen told us that poetry is very important to him and he often introduces his music lectures with a poem for his students. The first work we were about to hear contained his settings of four poems by the Spanish poet Frederico Garcia Lorca entitled Cuatro Canciones. For those of us not particularly fluent in Spanish, translations were printed in the programme. Garcia Lorca’s selection of words in these four poems is pared down to a minimum but they are put together to create a maximum effect building the most vivid combinations of picture, with sound, taste and feelings. In his setting of these words Lauridsen has also been spare. His music here is, as he explained, abstract, using for each song what he calls a musical “cell” and avoiding thirds and fifths, often the carriers of emotion in music until he reaches the last song. The instrumentation is equally spare in its basic layout – just clarinet, cello and piano to accompany the soaring soprano voice. It was the piano played brilliantly by Richard Bailey that carried much of the glitter and shine in these songs, like sparkling silver tinsel with clarinet (James Aburn) and cello (Matthew Clark) adding the merest tinges of colour, yet making those colours shine out strongly. The killer punch in these pieces however came from a dazzling performance by super-soprano Jillian Bain Christie. Wow! She was just marvellous, her silver-pure voice swimming with consummate ease along with Lauridsen’s highly polished vocal lines. This music was the perfect counterpart to Garcia Lorca’s delicate yet powerfully intense poetry.

Lauridsen explained his personal background to the composition of his next piece Canticle/ O vos omnes for solo clarinet with a short interlude for female voices. James Aburn was back to play the serpentine coils of clarinet writing. It was a smoothly hypnotic performance – highly atmospheric. It was an atmosphere farther intensified by the four singers: Lisa Johnston, Mhairi Sharp, Jennifer Taylor and Eilidh Thomson. Singing from the ante-chapel at the rear, their voices were punctuated by chimes. It was like the sound of a chorus of postulants coming from an abbey hidden in mists.
The final piece from Morten Lauridsen was from a very different part of his oeuvre. The text of “Where have the actors gone” was written by the composer himself. It has a very personal significance for him concerning the break up of a relationship in his earlier life. The poetry itself is absolutely brilliant, very moving and in the music he has written to accompany it he pays tribute to the many composers of American Musicals. It was originally composed for the jazz singer Sunny Wilkinson who Lauridsen said had a particularly seductive voice. She was not able to be in the Chapel on Wednesday but I certainly loved the performance by Jillian Bain Christie with Richard Bailey on piano. Jillian has one of these rare voices that is equally at home with classical, folk or popular music and she put this song by Morten Lauridsen among his most instantly appealing masterpieces.

The second part of the concert featured another World Première performance for SOUND. This was The Vox Collection: Four Movements of the Universe by a young up and coming composer currently studying post graduate composition at the University of Aberdeen, Bryce Hope (b. 1991). Bryce was the winner of the 2016 Carlaw/Ogston Composition Award. His piece has something of the idea of Holst’s Planet Suite although in this case Gaia (Planet Earth) is included and others are left out. The first two sections of the work, Mars: The Galactic Warrior and Gaia: the Singing Earth are dedicated to Professor Derek Ogston and Margaret Carlaw. These were followed by Jupiter: The Whispering Wind and Neptune: The Vox Balanae. (The voice of the whales?).

There were only five performers in this piece, Thomas Michie (piano), Bryce Hope (also piano but in a totally different way), Matthew Clark (cello), Brodie McCash (percussion) and Jamie Murray (electric bass). In spite of the small forces employed, the sound produced gave the impression of a much larger ensemble. Before the performance Bryce Hope told us that he felt this was the first piece in which he had found his own “voice” as a composer. It was interesting that although no electronics (excepting the bass) were used in this work the music had a strong affinity with the electroacoustic world. Like Holst’s Planets, this piece began with Mars: The Galactic Warrior not unlike Holst’s idea of Mars the bringer of War. Bryce hope collaborated with Thomas Michie in producing deep roaring sounds from the bass strings inside the piano. Michie would have had to engage the sustain pedal for this to work. There were many effects in this work that I have hardly seen before or at least not all together. There was whistling, okay Ennio Morricone in the Score of The Good, The Bad and The Ugly, but not really like in Bryce’s piece where it was more secretively employed. The strings of the bass guitar and the notes of the vibraphone were bowed but hit with sticks at the same time. It was a piece with an amazingly wide range of colourful sound effects as fascinating to watch as to hear. Many SOUND compositions have this in common. It was certainly enthralling and as Bryce said, in total, not like anything else I have heard or seen. Imagination is certainly set free to roam widely in Bryce’s music. I am eager to hear what he comes up with next.