

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN CONCERT SERIES 2018 – 2019

OGSTON MUSIC PRIZE FINAL

ADJUDICATING PANEL:

Dr PHILLIP COOKE: Head of Aberdeen University Music

Dr FIONA KENNEDY (OBE, DL) Singer, Songwriter, Broadcaster, Producer

SARAH MacDONALD:

Fellow and Director of Music at Selwyn College, Cambridge.

COMPETITORS 2019, in order of performance:

MATTHEW KILNER: Saxophone

LISA JOHNSTON: Soprano

PETER MacPHERSON: Gaelic Singer

OTTO ITGENSHORST: Pianist

DAVID WALSH: Tenor

CAITLIN BELL: Soprano

ACCOMPANISTS:

For MATTHEW KILNER:

NEIL KENDAL: Guitar, FINLEY CAMPBELL: Bass Guitar,

RICHARD GLASSBY: Drums.

For PETER MacPHERSON:

MILS ELDER: Guitar

For LISA JOHNSTON, DAVID WALSH and CAITLIN BELL:

Dr JEREMY COLEMAN: Piano

KING'S COLLEGE CHAPEL

Friday 29th March, 2019

King's College Chapel was packed for this year's annual **OGSTON MUSIC PRIZE**. Competitions like this always draw a large and enthusiastic crowd. Dr Phillip Cooke did not waste any time. He welcomed the audience, told us about the other members of the Adjudication Panel and introduced the first of the performers, saxophonist Matthew Kilner. With him he had brought three other fine jazz musicians to provide the trio who were to back him in his performances. Perhaps Matthew could also have been trying for the Composition Prize too because his opening piece, entitled 'Craignure' was his own composition. It was an attractive jazz oriented piece with just a touch of a Scottish accent. I was instantly impressed by the rich clean tone of his instrument. It looked great too. The second piece was Matthew's own arrangement of 'Delta City Blues' by Michael Brecker (1949 – 2007) a top American jazz saxophonist and composer. Matthew's first piece had many forays into technical brilliance but this second piece went well beyond that. It began with the

saxophone disporting itself without backing, then the saxophone itself grabbed hold of the rhythm of the music and drove it relentlessly forward and then the trio, drums first came in and joined him. What an astonishingly exciting display of instrumental brilliance.

Soprano Lisa Johnston opened her recital with 'Frühlingsfeier' (Spring Celebration) by Richard Strauss. This was a dazzling song with a ferociously difficult and exciting piano part played by Jeremy Coleman. As is often the case with Strauss, he gives the singer a real pyrotechnic explosion of a part testing the soprano voice to its limits. Lisa coped so well with that. To follow she sang Benjamin Britten's setting of the Irish favourite 'The Last Rose of Summer'. It is a simple song but Britten's arrangement uses both piano and voice to give it a far more exciting emotional charge and Lisa's pure clear soprano was perfectly on to it. Her final piece was one of Puccini's loveliest arias, 'Ch'il bel sogno di Doretta' (Who could ever guess Doretta's beautiful dream) from the opera 'La Rondine' (The Swallow). Lisa soared beautifully to her top notes in this aria, one of my favourites. Gaelic singer Peter MacPherson is a fine singer and a marvellous entertainer. He opened with a demonstration of 'Puirt a beul' also known as mouth music. It comes from a tradition where the Gaels either because of persecution or perhaps poverty had no instruments to support their ceilidh dances so they provided the instrumental music with their voices. As Peter really got going in this piece I noticed feet or hands in the audience beginning to dance along so the magic was certainly working. Peter followed with a very attractive song 'Mo Mhathair' (my Mother) and who could argue with that. I found it rather moving. He concluded with a Runrig piece, 'An Ubhal as Airde' (The highest apple) which he dedicated to the memory of his grandfather.

Otto Itgenshorst is a pianist from Cologne in Germany. He gave us a fiery performance of Chopin's 'Scherzo Op. 20 in b minor'. Its outer sections were dazzlingly full of notes though in the centre was a much calmer melodic passage. I liked the way the storm at the end of the piece broke into the gentler music. This was certainly a big and tempestuous performance.

Tenor David Walsh is just that – a real tenor, something that is quite rare in Britain. His performance of the 'Prologue' from Britten's 'The Rape of Lucretia' was absolutely splendid. Forceful, dramatic and delivered with perfect diction. I was reminded of a young Neil Mackie who was of course renowned for the perfection of his diction. David continued with the aria 'Ah Se Fosse' from Mozart's opera 'La Clemenza di Tito'. Here David offered us the most delicious light and transparent tenor singing. Still more beautiful was his performance of 'Si dolce e il tormento' by Monteverdi. I was really impressed.

Dramatic soprano Caitlin Bell has a powerful, irresistible voice. She launched into Britten's 'Be Kind and Courteous' from his opera 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'. Its highly ornamental leaps and stabs were performed with real dash and drive. Her delivery of 'Chanson Triste' by Henri Duparc was smooth and deliciously melodic. Then Caitlin showed us her real forte which is performance with a capital P when she launched into Bernstein's 'Glitter and Be Gay' from 'Candide'. Caitlin certainly claimed the platform and made it her own with this performance.

Too soon, it seemed, the performances were over. I was glad not to be one of the judges. How can you choose between jazz, Gaelic Puirt a beul, opera and Chopin on the piano.

While the judges were in session, last year's winner of the Ogston Music Prize, pianist William Gray proved not only that he was worthy of the prize last year but that since then he has come on by leaps and bounds. His performance of the opening movement of Mozart's 'Sonata in c minor' K457 was fast, light and bright a fine delivery of what Mozart surely intended. The first movement of the 'Sonata I c minor' by Szymanowski was strong and clear full of breadth, romantic and with so much variety of touch. A brilliant performance. William followed that with a sizzling and totally seductive performance of 'Libertango' by Piazzolla.

What were the judges going to decide. Sarah MacDonald spoke to each of the contestants in turn. Regarding Matthew Kilner she mentioned the outstanding ensemble playing and arrangements along with the textures and fascinating use of the instrument.

To Lisa Johnston, she complemented her changes of mood in the three songs she sang and said that for her it was the Britten arrangement she had enjoyed most.

She congratulated Peter MacPherson on the fine legato of his singing, his excellent tuning and his love of the music which he managed to transmit so well to the audience.

She gave Otto Itgenshorst some sage words of advice aiming to support his interpretation of Chopin.

With David Walsh, she complemented him on the fabulous and electrifying communication of the text in his opening aria, saying that some of his music, so well thought out was almost a masterclass.

She complemented Caitlin on her voice which she described as 'a fabulous instrument'.

Would these words reveal who was this year's winner. I had a brief chat with Dr Barbara Payne who was sitting nearby. We agreed that Matthew Kilner's playing had been special and that David Walsh had given a splendid performance.

Well we were not wrong. This year's prize was shared between Matthew and David. I can't argue with that. For the others, well, there were no losers you were all tremendous. Perhaps we should agree with Professor Ogston himself who hinted that the real winner every year is Aberdeen University Music, its teachers and indeed all its students. We are in a golden age. Lets hope it stays that way.