MUSIC IN THE UNIVERSITY: CONCERT SERIES 2016 – 2017
THE OGSTON MUSIC PRIZE FINALISTS:
JULIA FRASER: Soprano
KIRSTEN BEVERIDGE: Saxophone
ROSS CUMMING: Baritone
BRODIE McCASH: Percussion
JAMES ABURN: Clarinet
WILLIAM GRAY: Piano
KING’S COLLEGE CHAPEL
Friday 31st March, 2017

The 2016 – 2017 Concert Series is not quite over yet. There is still one special performance to go on the 11th June when the Strauss Horn Concerto will be played by Stuart Vettraino with the Marischal Chamber Orchestra in Butchart Recreation Hall. However in some respects the Final of the Ogston Prize marks the pinnacle, the culmination, of what has been a very successful concert season – the best ever in fact. Six top notch young musicians who just by being chosen to take part are among the very finest the University has to offer were in contention for the prize generously donated annually by Professor Derek Ogston. Along with Margaret Carlaw he was in the audience to witness the performances and then to present the prizes. I say prizes in the plural because every contestant receives a gift and although there is one winner there really must not be thought to be any losers in this competition.

This year’s judging panel was chaired by clarinet and tárógató virtuoso Esther Lamneck who earlier in the day had given a marvellous concert in the Butchart Recreation Hall. She was joined by Dr Edward Campbell, Head of Music at the University and by Professor Andrew Morrison, Organist and Master of the Choristers at St Andrew’s Cathedral.

First to perform was soprano Julia Fraser accompanied on piano by Andrew Fowler. Julia has a lovely silver soprano voice, blessed with the freshness and clarity of youth. Would she not be perfect in the role of Sophie in Der Rosenkavalier by Richard Strauss? It was fitting therefore that in her choice of programme she had included one of Strauss’s most beautiful songs, Morgen. Her singing in this piece was delicious. Her programme opened with a song by Samuel Barber, Nuvoletta. The words were a little difficult to follow but this is not surprising since the text is taken from Finnegan’s Wake by James Joyce and contains words that do not really exist in English, or any other language. For her final offering Julia gave us “Je Veux Vivre” Juliette’s Aria (Waltz Song) from Gounod’s opera Roméo et Juliette. Here was strong forceful singing full of ornamentation but with a light freshness to the performance as well – a perfect young girl’s song.

Julia was followed by saxophonist Kirsten Beveridge accompanied on piano by Andrew Cheyne. To open her programme she played ‘Escapades’ two pieces from the film Catch Me If You Can by John Williams. These were entitled ‘Closing In’ and ‘Reflections’. The first showed off Kirsten’s clear unwavering tone and smooth playing. There was just a touch of edginess too and this was absolutely correct in this piece. Reflections covered the wide range of the instrument and had a rather delicious meandering quality through which Kirsten manoeuvred splendidly.

Her final piece was totally different, Pequeña Czarda by the Spanish saxophonist Pedro Iturralde. After a slowly paced introduction this piece really took off. It was a characterful virtuoso showpiece and Kirsten really gave it “what for” in a splendidly swinging performance.

Ace percussionist Brodie McCash began his performance with the most astonishing piece. It was called Evil Ernie by the American percussionist Casey Cangelosi. This composer has also written a piece called White Knuckle Ride and Evil Ernie was just like that. Brodie played a whole range of percussion instruments all together in a fast and furious totally thrilling performance. Moving to tuned percussion he gave us Log Cabin Blues a ragtime xylophone solo by George Hamilton Green in an arrangement by Bob Becker. In this he was accompanied on side drum by Richard Glassby. It
set one young lady sitting just beneath me dancing in her seat – so that can’t be bad. Brodie finished his set with a wonderfully relaxed and expressive setting of Harold Arlen’s Over the Rainbow in a fine arrangement for marimba by Robert Oetomo – just fantastic, I thought.

Clarinetist James Aburn had chosen three particularly challenging pieces for his instrument. The third of Stravinsky’s Three Pieces for Clarinet solo was needle sharp and splendidly incisive. For Alban Berg’s Four Pieces Op. 5 for Clarinet and piano James was fortunate in having a fine piano accompanist in Jeremy Coleman. James brought out every detail of these pieces with startling clarity and often delicacy too in a display of really mature musicianship. The third movement of Poulenc’s Sonata for Clarinet and piano was spiky, full of energy and quirky good humour. I was really impressed.

Another change of tone came with pianist William Gray, a splendid exponent of the romantic style of piano playing. He opened with Rachmaninoff’s Elegie Op. 3 no. 1. He captured the dark tones of the opening splendidly well and was gentle in bringing out the melody to begin with before opening up in true romantic style. His playing was very nicely phrased.

In Prokofiev’s Sonata No. 3 William captured the busy, exciting, even dangerous opening with perfect precision. In this piece he managed to bring out every shade of music from lightness to forceful passages with a splendid variety of touch. By the end he seemed emotionally worn out. There is one performer whom I have missed out. This was the young baritone Ross Cumming who was accompanied on piano by the ever reliable Drew Tulloch. He began with George Butterworth’s setting of one of A. E. Housman’s most popular poems from A Shropshire Lad, Loveliest of Trees. It is of course the Cherry Tree and a perfect choice for the season. I walked past one in full bloom on my way to the concert. The next two pieces showed Ross Cumming’s voice at its fullest potential, Come Paride Vezzoso from Donizetti’s L’elisir D’amore followed by Handel’s splendidly militaristic aria Arm, Arm Ye Brave. Ross sang this magnificently with splendid vocal crescendos. He concluded his performance with Some Enchanted Evening from South Pacific a fine warm hearted performance. I liked the way Ross introduced his programme. He really connected with the audience. Another point that should not be forgotten about his singing, every word came through with dazzling clarity.

The three judges retired to consider their verdict. While they were away last year’s Ogston Prize Winner Amanda Garcia Fescarzaga delighted the audience with a nimble and agile performance of the opening movement of Haydn’s Sonata in E flat followed by a full power performance of Liszt’s Funerailles, No. 7 from Harmonies Poetiques. The opening was suitably dark before thunderous passaged took over. A sombre funeral march merged into more heroic music and finally a fevered explosion of thunderous piano music and a surprisingly muted ending.

Professor Paul Mealor entertained us with a couple of musical jokes while we waited a minute or two for the judging panel to arrive. Don’t give up the day job Paul, your music is infinitely better than your jokes.

At last the panel were back. Esther Lamneck had words of praise for every one of our fine performers before announcing the winner of the Ogston Prize 2017. Did you wonder why I left Ross Cumming till last in this review? Yes it was because he was this year’s popular prize winner. Always leave the best till last. Well done Ross. We look forward to the various performances that the Ogston Prize entails. As for the other five performers, remember that just being selected for the Final makes you a winner too. Actors and producers who are merely nominated for an Oscar put that proudly on their CVs. It’s great to win, but to be nominated – well that’s great too!