Rediscoveries is a new series of performances of electroacoustic music and sound art presented by SERG – Sound Emporium Research Group from the Department of Music at the University of Aberdeen. Thursday’s concert in the Series was given by Paul Koonce (b. 1956). He currently holds the position of Professor of Music at the University of Florida.

In his programme note for his first work in the concert entitled Hair of the Bow (2006) Paul Koonce writes, “Much of my recent work with simulated sound has focused on instrumental archetypes and the way they give electroacoustic music voice, embodiment and material through which to rehear and rethink the familiar”. This was very helpful as an introduction to the sound world of Paul Koonce which we were about to experience. Many of his programme notes as well as his spoken introductions gave us quite a bit of detail regarding how his sounds were produced and developed. I found this in itself very interesting because many of the electroacoustic composers I have heard in the Discoveries series prefer to keep such matters hidden from the listener. This raises the fascinating point regarding how we are meant to respond to the music. If we disregard the methods and possibly the intents of the sound production we can often respond with our imaginations to the music. Sometimes the title of a piece can steer us in a certain direction, for instance in this concert, the third piece entitled Clockwork certainly did that.

Let us consider the first piece, Hair of the Bow. The dimmed lights in the Chapel meant that before listening to this piece I had not read the programme note. Paul Koonce told us that the sounds and the title were derived from the playing of a cello. My first response certainly took that clearly on board. I could hear the thrust of the bow in the surge of the sounds or the sustained notes which contrasted with that. As I listened however, I felt the notes seem to take flight and I began to imagine the cries of strange birds and later on in the piece for some reason I began to think of the Greek myth of the Argonauts seduced by the songs of the Sirens. Why did the music make me think of that? Was I wrong to do so? Should I therefore have been concentrating on the way in which the sounds were related to the cello?

Anyway, the second piece entitled Out of Breath (2000) was somehow simpler and I was able to concentrate on the different results achieved from a single flute note and its harmonic constituents. The sheer variety that Paul Koonce had achieved in this piece was amazing, from thin tones to much richer creamier ones. The sounds of the puff of breath into the flute came through in so many ways too.

I have already mentioned the third piece, Clockwork (2008) which was derived from a single ride cymbal. It was amazing. Koonce had created a huge range of percussion sounds that did indeed suggest a whole world of clockwork sounds from the ratchet being wound up, to clicks and ticking, bells and finally as if we were in a clock shop with all the bells and alarms going off at once. The use of space in this piece was really exciting with the different tings and clicks coming from all sorts of places around us.

Breath and the Machine (1999) was a much more expansive piece and its concerns were rather different as Koonce writes in his programme note. “Breath and the Machine is a meditation on the ritual of musical sound making, in particular, the performer’s sublimated struggle between body and instrument”. This was a much fuller and richer piece that had an orchestral expanse to it. I found it totally gripping. It took us on a musical journey that I felt was really well shaped.

Träumerai Machine was quite different again. Here was a dreamlike exploration of sounds related to Schumann’s famous piano work created by advanced computer techniques. It was very much within the realms of dreams and I was reminded of when I was only three years old and escaped from my aunt’s garden. I went up the road and stopped in front of a window where a lady was playing a
grand piano. It was probably a Beethoven Sonata but to a three year old sounded like a kind of musical chaos. I listened carefully and managed to distinguish sounds that were repeated and thus decided that this must have been real music that was being played. This piece by Koonce brought back that freshness of response to music I experienced at the beginning of my listening life. The final piece in the concert based on the sounds of a violin was entitled Parallax (2013). Bowed sounds and pizzicatos came at us at all levels and from all directions. The solo violin and ensemble sounds were all explored in this fascinating piece. The concert raised so many points of interest regarding the response of the listener to the music just as all the Discoveries concerts have done. I will go on thinking about it and that is just great. Thank-you Professor Koonce.