There were so many splendidly varied items on offer from Thursday’s hugely entertaining concert given by members of the University Percussion Ensemble followed in the second half by Pandemonium, the University Steel Pan Orchestra, both directed expertly by Dr Lisa Nicol. A selection of serious percussion works included one which provided an example of one of the many possible unusual items capable of being co-opted into a percussion ensemble. There were works for virtuoso percussion soloists, one for a very lively trio of first rate players as well as the full exciting sweep of the percussion orchestra. These more serious pieces were followed by three works which though still just as demanding of skills came across to the audience as pure joyous entertainment. This led into a second half in which the Steel Pan Orchestra brought the glow of Caribbean, South American or African musical sunshine into the Butchart Hall to chase away the ghosts of Aberdeen’s dreich February weather.

It was the opening work entitled Mind Changes, Time Changes, by one of the members of the Percussion Ensemble, student composer Richard Glassby that used some surprising percussion “instruments”, in this case a row of upturned plastic buckets sitting on chairs. I was reminded initially of some of the drumming groups that front political protests especially in Scotland. Was there an echo of pipe band drumming? If so, this soon journeyed into the realm of jazz and possibly African drumming. Glassby’s writing expanded into clicking of the sticks, foot stamping and clapping – a splendidly wide sound range in this imaginative and colourful composition. Ellipsis by the American composer Nathan Daughtrey presented a movement in three parts - an opening section in which tuned percussion gave us a marvellous clangorous carillon of sound over a bass provided by strong drums – a more gentle central section led by the tuned percussion players was followed by a return to the opening sound world. The precision synergy between the players was fantastic. Here indeed were “good vibrations”.

Timpani Feature gave us solo performances by two young players. Peter Ney played a piece for timpani by Vic Firth in which damping the drums was almost as important as playing them. The turning of a stick from the soft head to the hard handle altered the sound of the drum in a fascinating way. Ian Christie gave a wonderfully clean and virtuoso performance of a fine piece by Elliot Carter. I was deeply impressed.

Ian Christie was joined by Peter Ney and Brodie McCash in the opening movement of Trio per uno by the Serbian composer Nebojša Živović. The sound diversity and precision playing in this piece was exemplary. I loved it.

Brodie McCash played the new full scale marimba in a splendidly jazzy arrangement of Over the Rainbow. This was a marvellous crossover piece that led us into the three lighter works in the first half. Two of these were Ragtime pieces by the American xylophonist and composer George, Hamilton Green Jr. (1893 - 1970) in arrangements by Bob Becker a member of the Steve Reich Ensemble. The lead player in Log Cabin Blues was Brodie McCash and in Xylophonia it was Ian Christie. The audience loved these pieces and so did I.

Most amazing though was the final piece The Martians Tribes by Emmanuel Séjourné head of percussion at the Conservatoire de Strasbourg. It was a fantastic fun piece in which we were asked to imagine that the four players on just the one marimba were meant to be Martians who land on earth and go into a house where they find a marimba and begin to explore and finally play with it. Ian Christie, Peter Ney, Brodie McCash and Morven MacDonald were our Martians. The piece had African connotations in its ever more jazzy repetitive grooves which also paid tribute to
minimalism. This was a fun filled performance in which dazzlingly exacting playing was enlivened by comedy and precision choreography. Well done that marvellously entertaining quartet of performers. They were obviously having great fun and so were we in the audience.

The Steel Pan Orchestra performed pieces based on popular music drawn from the repertoires of groups such as Coldplay, Viva La Vida arranged by Ian Christie or Van Halen’s Jump arranged by Aaron Ziegler. The Steel Pans can sound like an organ or in the Ziegler arrangements almost like a choir. The opening song Hot, hot, hot was wonderfully lively and colourful. Bahia Girl had a rich South American flavour. The Lion Sleeps Tonight I last heard sung by The Springfields on BBC 4 in a programme celebrating the career of Dusty Springfield. Pandemonium’s version was a little less lively than Dusty’s singing in the group before her hair went blonde and she went solo. The highlight of Pandemonium’s performance however was their version of the Lambada. What a pity I am too old these days to get up and dance. Pandemonium certainly made me feel I wanted to.