Peter Hill, pianist extraordinaire, writer and lecturer brought together two richly fascinating keyboard works in Thursday’s celebrity recital for Aberdeen University Music. At first, these pieces would seem to have little to do with one another but both contain a treasure chest of musical detail to fascinate and challenge the serious music student. For those students this was just a taster of two pieces, the Bach in particular, that could trigger a lifetime of detailed study. For the more general audience member it provided an opportunity to revel in an evening of marvellous virtuoso keyboard playing.

Peter Hill’s introductory words laid before us the important outlines of the music we were about to hear. Messiaen’s La Fauvette Passerinette (1961) was in a sense rescued and restored to life from Messiaen’s pencil sketches by Peter Hill. The work was pretty well complete and has now been published by Faber Music in a very attractive edition which Peter Hill showed us. It is fiendishly difficult to play and perhaps even to follow and I must complement today’s page turner for his work in Thursday’s performance. The piece, like many other of Messiaen’s works is strongly influenced by the composer’s interest in birdsong. Peter Hill amused us by his jocular anecdote about why Messiaen’s music does not sound like actual birdsong. It sounds like Messiaen. Perhaps the birds in the composer’s garden heard his piano playing and imitated it. Well, of course this is just a joke. La Fauvette Passerinette (Subalpine Warbler) contains Messiaen’s notations for piano of the songs of many other birds and he has shaped and ordered these in order to produce something that although it comes directly from nature and the world of birdsong is also a work of art. We could hear the various different birdsongs brought together to create many different effects even including quite angry flurry. Repeated notes in particular were important. As the piece progressed I could imagine a walk through the woods surrounding Messiaen’s garden. The atmospheric quality of this music was very powerful in Peter Hill’s exciting performance.

If Messiaen’s piece could benefit from detailed study of how the different birdsongs are put together, Bach’s Goldberg Variations provide a much wider field of study. I cannot discover who was the first to say the following words about the Goldberg Variations but they are quoted on the sleeves of several recordings and I think they are quite apposite. “The Goldberg Variations are a Rubik’s Cube of invention and architecture”. I remember the astronomer Carl Sagan being asked what music should be put on the disc sent into deep space with the Voyager Probes. Someone suggested Bach’s Goldberg Variations but Sagan replied, “No, that would just be showing off.” The Variations are an extraordinary tour de force of the techniques of variation. Bach’s creative imagination in these works appears limitless. His imagination seemingly never tired.

Peter Hill told us that for him the Variations remind him of the paintings of Watteau. Bach of course never saw these paintings, he did not like us have the internet. What Peter Hill meant was that the elegance, the colour and the vital force of these paintings are matched in Bach’s extraordinary variety and energy. All these elements were to the fore in Hill’s performance on Thursday.

Of course we have to remember that these pieces were originally composed for a double manual harpsichord. Performing these on piano raises some problems. Some of the writing of Bach requires cross hands and we were able to see Peter Hill put that into practice and one or two instances are simply impossible to play on piano although they can be “faked” by a very skilful performer. In addition the piano affords far more variation in dynamics and stress than a harpsichord so each individual pianist will play these pieces in his or her own way. I thought Peter Hill captured the regularity of touch that was required and he brought a special lightness to many of the pieces. I did enjoy some of the more forceful variations in his performance too. The sheer variety of Bach’s writing came out and kept the level of fascinating going throughout a very long work. There were
even some moments where, not exactly a sense of humour in the music, but something particularly clever surfaced and made people smile or laugh with sheer delight.
The work ends with the same aria with which it began. Peter Hill told us that after hearing all the variations we would respond quite differently to it. I think that was true. Hill’s playing of the final pages seemed to have a special depth that was not anything like so obvious at the start.