Friday’s presentation of music by four current PhD students studying electroacoustic music was very much an international event. The four students whose compositions were to be presented were from Australia, South Korea, the United States and Italy in that order. Two of the students whose work was to be heard were in King’s Pavilion to introduce their own works. In the case of the other two, Professor Pete Stollery was on hand to provide introductions.

First to be heard was the Australian composer Jamie Lawson and Professor Stollery introduced his piece entitled Waiting. This was the longest of the four works and we were told to listen out for the slowly unfolding changes in timbre during the sixteen minutes of the piece. The opening sound which was to be the core of the work emerged quietly. It was metallic in timbre and gave an impression of being a chord consisting of several notes. This core sound gradually became louder and as I listened I sensed a kind of internal wave-like motion within the “chord”. An almost subliminal reedy sound began to be heard apparently from outside the central “chord” – sometimes higher in pitch sometimes lower. Gradually this amorphous sound began to define itself more clearly as a twang then as recognisable notes. Were these from outside the central core of sound or were they the result of concentrations on parts of the central core? I began to feel that the second possibility was more likely. The whole effect was rather like a slowly morphing kaleidoscope of sound with individual notes becoming much clearer and moving from different directions, sometimes on the right then on the left and more varied in pitch. Towards the end the music became quieter fading finally to nothing. It seemed a well shaped piece and contained a wealth of sound detail that held my fascination from start to finish.

Kwangrae Kim from South Korea introduced his own work. Atmosphere was introduced by his own words and by a text on screen. Unlike the three other fixed media, sound only pieces, Kim’s was an audiovisual work with visuals cleverly mirroring every aspect of the sounds. Little disjointed “peeps” were accompanied by dots on the screen which as the sounds lengthened and grew became moving lines on the screen. The sounds developed different pitches with different lines on the screen. The music got faster with rhythm and movement within the sounds as well as on screen becoming more important. Originally sparse sounds developed in richness and variety of pitch. There was a thickening of both sound and image as the piece reached a climax with rotating circles on screen mirrored in the sounds which also gained motion. Finally what looked like a globe of the world appeared on screen before the music in effect reflected its beginning – another nicely shaped work.

Tyler Lewis was born in Seattle but he composed his piece Spring whine when he was studying in Montreal. He explained that his piece was inspired by the coming of spring in Canada where the winters can be long and ferocious. Unlike the other pieces which ran in a sort of continuous line, his piece presented a series of sound pictures distinct from one another both varied and colourful. Some of the sounds were very suggestive of real nature sounds: howling or whistling winter winds, cracking ice, birdsong and chiming bells. Much of his sound world was more
abstract than suggestive of anything that could be pinned down. I did find his piece very colourful and expressive. There was one moment when a general metallic ringing became the celebratory chiming of bells and I was reminded of the final section of Schoenberg’s Gurrelieder where the speaker recites the words:

\[ Welch Wogen und Schwingen! Welch Ringen und Singen! \]

I found Tyler Lewis’s celebration of the return of spring as exciting and moving as Schoenberg’s at this point in his work.

Professor Stollery introduced the final work in the concert by the young Italian composer Luca Nasciuti who on Friday had to be in London preparing for another concert. Like Professor Stollery himself, Nasciuti’s music sets great store on the idea of place. His work entitled, Under your skin I cannot touch, was inspired by a stay he had in Helmsdale, on the east coast of Sutherland. Its whole ambience was so different from the composer's home town of Parma. Professor Stollery explained that although place was important to Nasciuti, he likes to treat his material as becoming more abstract than just untreated sound. It has always been a deep point of consideration for me as to what extent the listener should try to identify the sources of sounds in electroacoustic music. You will often get it wrong in any case. The crackling of a fire could be the crinkling of paper, eggs frying or even the scraping of a piano string changed electronically. The first two pieces in the programme were totally abstract probably produced electronically while I suspect both Lewis and Nasciuti used sounds culled from the environment?

Like the first work, Nasciuti used evolving timbral changes in his music. To begin with we heard rainwater, voices, cracklings and wind then the music became more abstract. The sense of motion in the music became more important. Things speeded up sounds became fuller and stronger. Towards the end of the piece I sensed blowing wind and trickling water. This was a portrait in sound of the environment of Helmsdale. The music captured the essence of the place not so much in real detail but rather in the way that Harris Tweed’s colours capture the essence of place where the cloth is woven. Do you believe that? Well that is how it is successfully sold.

Today’s concert was fascinating - so many varied sound worlds that we were privileged to share and so many contrasting ways in which the electroacoustic elements can be exploited.