Friday’s concert given by the University of Aberdeen Chamber Choir conducted by Michael Zaugg with the participation of the University Percussion Ensemble along with special guests, the Edinburgh Quartet and organist Dr Ed Jones, presented two new works by graduate composition students Sarah Rimkus and Thomas LaVoy with, in between those new compositions, two entrancingly mystical choral works by James MacMillan. From beginning to end it was a sensational concert – a five-star performance of four totally wondrous works.

To open the concert, Bealltainn, the word for a Gaelic festival celebrating the end of winter, very apposite since the clocks go forward to Summer Time this Sunday, brought together organist Ed Jones with percussionists Morven MacDonald and David Henderson. This was very much a work in which layers of musical textures were predominant. A wash of organ sound was punctuated by a wide range of percussion effects – bongos, bowed bells, large drum played with brushes, tom tom, a full percussion orchestra in fact. The organ sound grew and swelled magnificently, its general sound wash containing many complex details that married so well with the percussion effects – an astounding example of colourful orchestral writing. I could sense the music rising up to chase away the last lingering shivers of winter.

The Chamber Choir were brought in for the two marvellously mystical MacMillan pieces. Conducted by Michael Zaugg they really rose to the occasion, sounding inspired. A New Song opened with sopranos and organ before the full choir came in. This was a choral work in which, like the previous work, layers of musical texture were important. I liked the section where the basses with Théophile Krosi-Douté giving the line an almost Russian octavist sound supported the melody sung smoothly by the tenors.

Even more entrancing was Who are these angels?, in which the male voices sing in Latin while the females ask the question that gives the work its title. The Edinburgh Quartet gave an accompaniment that was at least as colourful if not more so than an organ. Catherine Marwood on viola and first violin Zoë Bayers were particularly special. At the end of the work the quartet is transformed into celestial birds swooping from heaven – or perhaps they are the voices of the angels?

This was a wonderfully mystical piece and it provided a fine introduction to what was the main work of the concert, Endless, by Thomas LaVoy. What an astonishing and absolutely magnificent piece it was. No wonder it got a standing ovation from the audience – and Aberdeen audiences almost never do that. The text in five sections was by the Indian poet and composer Rabindranath Tagore and was in itself absolutely fascinating. LaVoy is a composition pupil of Professor Paul Mealor. Along with Morten Lauridsen, Mealor and now LaVoy are exponents of what could be
called the new tonality in music – in other words they write tonal classical music in a fresh and exciting new way. It was thought in the twentieth century that tonality was a busted flush – it had all been done before, but these composers prove that this is not true. Their music brings freshness and new possibilities to tonal composition and best of all they each sound unique and not exactly like one another.

LaVoy uses choir, soloists, string quartet and percussion in his piece and he does so in a unique way. When I was a student we were told that you should not use the word “orchestration” you should say orchestral writing but I am going to say that LaVoy’s grasp of orchestration was fantastic. To take just one small example among many, he blended crotales (sometimes called antique cymbals) see Ravel, seamlessly with marimba creating a new sound that was as one, but had the advantages of both – attack along with lasting resonance. How brilliant was that!

Bowed crotales, string quartet and marimba blended with sopranos in the choir at the opening of the work. In the third opening section soprano soloist Karen Proctor was backed by a gentle hum from the chorus and something similar was gifted to the mezzo soloist Sarah LeBrocq. Baritone Ross Cumming managed triumphantly to come through the astonishing crescendo from percussion choir and quartet and here the harmonic colours were darkened to match Tagore’s text. All three soloists were absolutely splendid.

There was a moment of tremendous contrapuntal excitement near the end of the work where “the stream of life” was depicted effervescently in the music.

Interestingly, the work follows some of the shaping of western religious music with its choral sections and solos but it was very new and very different as well expounding Tagore’s views on life and rebirth. It was quite a long piece and contained so many gorgeous choral and instrumental colours that it would take me several volumes to explain. That will be a job for some future musicologist because I am certain that this work has a long and bright future ahead of it. I look forward to hearing that today’s performers and their marvellous conductor have produced a recording of the work. Perhaps they already have, there were microphones in the Cathedral. Pity about our local police force’s contribution to the performance though.