The name of today’s splendid Duo, SCAW is made up from the initials of the two performers Sarah Watts and Antony Clare. They specialise in new and original repertoire and today’s lunchtime concert reawakened happy memories of so many fascinating performances brought to Aberdeen by the SOUND Festival.

Sarah provided helpful backgrounds on the four pieces she was about to play. Here are a few short details of the composers whose music was about to fascinate and perhaps astonish us:

Steven Davismoon was born in London. He took his doctorate in composition at the University of Edinburgh which is where our two performers met him. He now works at the University of Salford near Manchester.

Sohrab Uduman was born in Sri Lanka in 1962. He began his musical life as a clarinettist at the University of Surrey and now works in the Department of Music and Music Technology at the University of Keele, Newcastle-under-Lyme, Staffordshire.

George Nicholson was born in County Durham in 1949. He studied at the University of York and is currently senior lecturer in composition at the University of Sheffield.

Ton Bruynèl was born in 1934 in Utrecht and died in Mailly, France in 1998. He worked in the Electronic Music Studio at the University of Utrecht and Delft later renamed the Institute for Sonology.

The first piece in the concert was Stephen Davismoon’s Through Timeless Shades of Green (2012). Sarah Watts told us that the piece was inspired by the impending birth of Davismoon’s baby son and the coming of Spring after Winter. One of the main features of the piece was its use of an extended technique for the bass clarinet known as multiphonics. The clarinet normally plays one note at a time but the extended multiphonic technique can produce high and low notes at the same time. I asked Sarah after the concert and she said that the high notes which she played on the bass clarinet in this piece were harmonics. The bass clarinet playing in this piece though advanced in its melodic and rhythmic format had a definite dreamy pastoral quality and contrasting high and low figures were a prominent feature of the music. That was mirrored in Antony Clare’s piano playing where the top and bottom registers of the piano were often contrasted with one another.

Glitschig, the German word for Slippery is the title of the next work composed by Sohrab Uduman in 2014. Sarah explained that elements of the music are made to slide and collide. The influence of jazz idioms and a suggestion of the improvisatory style were important in this music. That was immediately obvious in Sarah’s virtuoso playing. She grabbed our imaginations and took us along on a wild ride with her. Antony Clare’s piano part was astonishing – torrents of notes were spilled from the piano. In the more gentle central section of the piece the piano part became quite fragmentary before a return to the opening ideas with torrents of piano notes before at the conclusion of the work both ideas were contrasted. What an exciting performance!

Darkness Visible (2012) by George Nicholson was a musical exploration of darkness and shade. The piano was often used at its lowest darkest register and Antony Clare also worked directly on the strings inside the instrument from time to time. In this piece the piano as a percussion instrument was very much to the fore and there was an echo of that in the pops played on the clarinet by Sarah, otherwise the clarinet part was dark and sinuous.

Most astonishing in today’s performance was the final work, Looking Ears for Bass Clarinet, Grand Piano and Soundtracks (1972) by Ton Bruynèl. The original soundtrack, now transferred to CD was set off and closed by Adam Cresser. This was a piece in which the three sound sources intertwined superbly well. The innards of the piano were made to sing out in so many ways, with a beater, a
knife and even some chains. Like many such pieces it was as important to see as well as to hear what was going on.
A large contingent of Chinese students who are studying the teaching of English as a foreign language were in attendance at the concert. Two of them told me they thought today’s music was really beautiful and that music is a universal language that can be understood right across the world. I wonder what our own students thought.