SPECTRUM, Aberdeen University’s specialist new music ensemble always has something exciting on offer. Like today’s concert, their performances are often great fun too. There is a frisson of enthusiasm and anticipation that gets through to the audience as the young players and composers take part in demonstrating different aspects of contemporary music. The composers highlighted in Friday’s performance were that grand master of minimalism Steve Reich along with the young Parisian composer Théophile Krosé-Douté who is currently in his second year of studies for a PhD in composition and mathematics at Aberdeen University.

University Music’s own percussion star Ian Christie was joined by Eden Mikula in their performance of a favourite Steve Reich classic Clapping Music and then two keyboard players, Andrew Fowler and Bryce Hope joined forces in Reich’s Piano Phase. Both pieces might seem outwardly simple. The performers are given relatively short rhythmic or in the case of Piano Phase rhythmic and melodic motifs or patterns which they are simply required to repeat over and over again. That's only on the surface however. The patterns are required to separate by an increasing number of beats so that what the listener experiences is an ever changing kaleidoscopic effect of different sound patterns. This is what Sarah Rimkus in her Director’s note refers to as Process in music. There is a sense in these pieces of numbers and mathematics crossing over into music. I also feel that in Reich’s pieces the world of visual art especially Op Art also comes through. Often in black and white its static patterns give the viewer the impression of movement, hidden images, flashing and vibrating patterns, or swelling and warping. There is something of that effect translated into sound in Reich’s music. Ian Christie and Eden Mikula gave a fine performance and Andrew Fowler with Bryce Hope certainly captured the spirit of Reich’s intentions. I liked the way that Andrew signalled to Bryce when internal changes were required. Many different patterns emerged from within the music and it was altogether a fascinating sound experience. Are these pieces easy to perform? On the contrary, they are among the most intricate and difficult so well done to both of today’s duos.

Théophile Krosé-Douté’s piece entitled À contre-courant explored the idea of process within composition in a totally different way. His piece in two movements I. Aquarius and II. Capricorn was composed using astronomical data and mathematical principles to establish the rules around which it is built. That is all very well but none of that came through to me in listening to the piece. I had a chat after the concert with Joe Stollery whose opinions I respect and he said to me that he would have to study the score in detail before fully comprehending the compositional process. There are many pieces in existence where the composer has used all sorts of musical and non musical references in the process of composition. What matters to an audience, especially at a first hearing, is what the music sounds like.

I really enjoyed Théophile’s piece. His choice of instrumentation was unusual, fascinating and attractive. Clarinet played by James Aburn and viola by Saskia Mucke gelled together very
beautifully as did the marimba played by Ian Christie (a quite testing part) and the timpani played by Eden Mikula. What really bound the piece together and added an element of spaciousness to the music was the use of the organ part played by Kevin Cameron. I thought that was a touch of genius. Sarah Rimkus conducted and held the performance together unobtrusively and sympathetically. This was a powerfully atmospheric and highly colourful piece. I believe Théophile could well have a lucrative career as a film composer?