UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN CONCERT SERIES 2016 – 2017
ABERDEEN SINFONIETTA TRIO – LUNCHETIME CONCERT
DREW TULLOCH: Piano
BRYAN DARGIE: Violin
ALISON MCDONALD: Cello
KING’S COLLEGE CHAPEL
Friday 24th February, 2017

It was commendable that Aberdeen University Music should have invited one of our finest local ensembles, Aberdeen Sinfonietta Trio, to be guest performers at one of their lunchtime concerts. The programme consisted of two very different works, a new contemporary piece by one of the University’s current graduate composition students, Théophile Krosi-Douté, followed by a trio that stands high at the very centre of the classical repertoire, Beethoven’s Piano Trio Op. 1 no. 3 in c minor.

Théophile Krosi-Douté, in addition to his interests in music is fascinated by Astronomy. Today’s piece entitled Sagittarius Trio no. 1 is the second in a series of “process” pieces, drawing inspiration from the Zodiac constellations. In “process music” the composer follows a number of preset rules, in this case derived from astronomical data and mathematical principles which establish the rules for the creation of the musical composition. Through mathematics, stars are linked into clusters and then these musical stars add up to intervals, chords and themes. This is as good a source of inspiration as any. Messiaen used birdsong, Schoenberg his twelve note system while Dimitri Tiomkin owned up famously (or infamously) to plundering the scores of past composers. Actually, the money offered by the Studios was enough to inspire him.

So, with all that information gifted by today’s programme note, what was Théophile’s music actually like? Themes were delivered by cello first, then violin and finally piano. These were brought together and then delivered by cello, violin and piano in that order. There was a firm sense of structure to the music but beyond that it delivered a powerful sense of instrumental colour and through that of atmosphere. I liked the pizzicato and spiccato colourations used by Alison McDonald on cello.

In his programme note, Théophile writes, “The intent behind this set of rules is to push a composer’s creativity beyond these self-imposed limitations, with the hope of creating a unique piece of music”. I believe that here Théophile is saying something similar to what Schoenberg said when blamed by critics for setting up a system of composition followed by hoards of disciples. “It all just sounds so nasty”, said these critics. “Yes”, replied Schoenberg, “That is because they use no artistry in establishing the tone rows. You must use artistry and imagination as well as just rules”.

Well, I think Théophile has achieved just that. I may not understand the way he works but to sum up in simple terms, I liked what his music sounded like and most of the others I spoke to after the concert agreed.

Beethoven, of course, also had rules to help him with the art of composition. In his case these were the forms of high classical music, sonata, variation, minuet and trio and so on. Like Théophile, Beethoven was also stretching these rules to see how far his creative imagination could move within and around them.

The Trio in c minor is a marvellous example of that creative impulse. In the first movement tensions between major and minor modes and the ranking of the importance of the three instruments of the trio as they led or followed one another were fascinating. The piano was often in the lead especially at the outset with the others almost like an accompanying orchestra in miniature. Later on though, it was the piano that played the role of accompanist. All of these tensions generated tremendous urgency and power in this music. Drew Tulloch played with delightful ease and fluency and can I say at this point that the Chapel piano was sounding magnificent today. Bryan Dargie and Alison McDonald tackled their parts with admirable intensity and energy.
The second movement, a theme with five variations, including a stunning one in the minor had the piano taking the lead once again at the outset but the string players led the variations with a particularly delicious one led by the cello.

The Menuetto was played with admirable lightness. Sparkling piano runs were responded to by violin and cello.

The finale, Prestissimo, is described in most of the books as returning to the serious intensity of the opening movement but for me the piano part led off by Drew Tulloch had a feeling of jollity to it that I really liked. The conclusion of the piece has a surprise for us. You think that Beethoven must be getting ready for a frenzied conclusion but instead the movement ends quite suddenly and quietly. Was this an example of Beethoven’s sense of humour. If so, it was very different from Haydn’s.