UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN CONCERT SERIES 2016 – 2017

THE SNOWMAN IN CONCERT

PROFESSOR PAUL MEALOR: Narrator

MARISCHAL CHAMBER ORCHESTRA

JOHN FREDERICK HUDSON: Conductor

JACK CHRISTIE: Assistant Conductor

LYDIA SPETH: Assistant Conductor and Piano

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN CHORAL SOCIETY

KATHLEEN CRONIE: Conductor

ANDREW MORRISON: Organ

Over the years I have attended many University Christmas Concerts. They often followed an established pattern bringing together the Wind Bands and the Choral Society in a selection of well known carols for audience participation – “This time, chiefly Yourselves!” as Leonard Sachs, master of ceremonies for The Good Old Days used to say with a bang of his gavel. Roger Williams over those early years had the audiences well trained and we all joined in with a will. Interspersed between the audience carols were interesting pieces for choir as well as interludes for wind band. It was a popular and successful format. The second half of this year’s concert retained something of the old days in miniature but now that University Music has many more very gifted students and graduate teachers there is scope for more exciting performance possibilities and Thursday’s concert worked spectacularly well. Jack Christie and the Marischal Chamber Orchestra set things going in splendid style with their performance of the Troika from Prokofiev’s Lieutenant Kijé. The strings led by Valerie Cronshaw were particularly impressive along with the masterful percussion section.

With everything nicely warmed up it was time for the highlight of the performance, Howard Blake’s The Snowman with a fantastic performance by “Uncle” Paul Mealor as narrator. I thought he was tremendous. A young Chinese girl who sat in front of me in the audience said that his words painted lovely pictures in her imagination. I agree. Uncle Paul took me back to my childhood days when before I was five years old I would listen to Daphne Oxenford telling stories on Listen with Mother. The pictures that Paul painted were equally vivid.

The orchestra conducted by John Frederick Hudson was tremendous. It began with the sound of the piano played by Lydia Speth then every detail of the story was underlined by the music in the way that the Hollywood musicians who worked on cartoon films used to do. If Paul’s words drew the outlines of the story, John Frederick Hudson and his orchestra filled in the outlines in glorious musical Technicolor. The song, Walking in the Air, sung with proper treble purity by Mhairi Sharp almost brought tears to my eyes and I felt really sad when the Snowman finally melted away at the end of the story.

Lydia Speth who had played the piano part in The Snowman took over as conductor for Sleigh Ride by Leroy Anderson. I loved the humorous touches of the percussion in this piece and the neighing of the horse at the end supplied by trumpeter Tobias P. Wolf. I was once again taken back to my childhood as I remembered hearing this piece on the radio as a little boy lying on my tummy on the fireside rug eating chocolates in the shape of animals sent from America by my uncle Pat – a rare treat when rationing was still in force in Britain just after the war.
In the second half of the concert, the Marischal Chamber Orchestra had tidied away their instruments and stands leaving the way open for Kathleen Cronie and the Choral Society accompanied on organ by Andrew Morrison to lead us in singing the popular carols: O Come All Ye Faithful, Silent Night and Hark! The Herald Angels sing. On their own, the choir entertained us with Holst’s setting of Personent Hodie and Christmas would not be Christmas these days without at least one setting by John Rutter – in this case The Candlelight Carol with particularly fine singing from the female members of the choir. Too soon it was all over and Andrew Morrison played us out with Herbert Sumson’s Prelude on Adeste Fidelis. It was a great Christmas concert and as Paul Mealor said at the end of his narration, “It was magic!” I particularly enjoyed The Snowman. It gave me an idea for a future concert – how about Peter and the Wolf sometime next year?