What an absolutely fabulous concert! During his time in Aberdeen, John Frederick Hudson has given so much of value to Aberdeen University Music. He has raised the quality of performance in all the choirs and orchestras of the University and today’s concert, sadly his last as a conductor before he moves down south, saw his career in Aberdeen ending not just on a high note but on the highest possible note. He put so much energy and enthusiasm into his conducting that his players responded with a will and seemed to be enjoying the performance every bit as much as we in the audience were.

It helped of course that all three pieces in today’s concert were well known popular concert favourites packed full of good tunes. This of course does not make the playing easier – far from it. If you go wrong the audience will be instantly aware of it. If you are playing atonal music and the second bassoon makes a mistake in the retrograde inversion of the tone row not many people will know. In today’s performance not only did the orchestra play ‘all the right notes in the right order’ to misquote a famous comedian, they created three performances that captured the spirit, the atmosphere and the composers’ deepest intentions.

First off was one of the most popular pieces by Camille Saint-Saëns, his Danse Macabre Op. 40 with Anya Mcrae as violin soloist. The orchestra created the eerie background of the music with the chimes of the midnight clock heard clearly on piano rather than harp. It worked well. Both Anya as soloist and the orchestral strings gave rich full throated performances. The xylophone was splendid representing the dancing skeletons as Anya led them in the dance with an irresistible performance rhythmically and using a variety of violin voices – a delicious performance in fact. John Frederick Hudson really pumped up his players from the podium and they responded with a will. Strings and woodwind were special with a memorable clarinet solo by James Aburn. The cock-crow sent all the ghoulish dancers back to their graves in a hurry and the work ended with the graveyard now peaceful and empty as the solo violin died to a whisper.

A completely different scene was portrayed in the second piece, Mendelssohn’s Hebrides Overture. The full rich smoothly played lower strings and bassoons created the feeling of a swelling sea while the violins suggested white foamed waves smashing on the shore. Once again in this piece the woodwind were special. There was some very delicate playing from the strings in this piece too. Although Mendelssohn did not mean this as a literally graphic depiction of the sea and the caves, nevertheless this performance transported us magically out of the concert hall and into the composer’s remembered seascape.

Dvořák’s Symphony in e minor Op. 95, From the New World, is one of the most popular of late nineteenth century works. Unlike some composers, Tchaikowski for instance, Dvořák wrote most of his own tunes and this symphony is full of them. The orchestra opened the work with just the right gentleness before moving into the Allegro molto with dramatic bow thrusts. The woodwind choir especially the flute played by Chubbe Anucha are worthy of mention in this movement. Most magnificent though was the beautiful Largo with its gorgeous cor anglais solo. Supporting it so magnificently there was lovely pianissimo playing from the violins. The horns, the pizzicato basses, and later the chorus of birds were all splendid. The tune to which the words Goin’ Home were later added suggested a spiritual sung perhaps by the weary workers in the cotton fields as they wander home from their labours in the evening. I know this is probably not what Dvořák intended but this performance did suggest a warm twilight scene to me.
The Scherzo was lively and incisive but with a splendid lightness of touch in many parts. Cellos, brass, first violins and percussion including the delightful triangle were all the star performers in this movement. By the time the players reached the finale they realised they had clicked with the audience and their bold and vivacious playing projected a feeling of joy and confidence that transmitted itself right through to the audience. All this was driven by John Frederick Hudson’s energetic conducting that lifted the whole performance well out of the ordinary and up into the truly special and the truly memorable. Bravissimo!