

ABERDEEN UNIVERSITY MUSIC CONCERT SERIES 2018 – 2019

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN PERCUSSION ENSEMBLE

Dr LISA NICOL: Director

PERFORMERS:

MURRAY BARTLE, JOSH BERRIE, HAILEY DOLPH, DAVID HENDERSON, MORVEN HOLLICK, ANNA MATHESON, EDEN MIKULA, EUAN MacDONALD, BRODIE McCASH, PETER NEY, MOLLY NICOLSON, JOY SMITH, EILIDH WILLIAMSON.

BUTCHART RECREATION HALL

Friday 1st March, 2019

In most orchestral concerts, the percussionists are right at the back of the orchestra, often with not all that much to do. However they have to be consummate musicians – always ‘on the ball’. There is a story regarding a performance of Dvořák's New World Symphony where there is a single cymbal clash and where once, the percussionist just failed to come in. I forget who the conductor was but he was not pleased. Years later, he was back to conduct the same piece with the same orchestra. Before he began the rehearsal, he said to the orchestra, ‘Dat becken man, is he dead?’ This would never happen to any of the members of the UoA Percussion Ensemble. They are all very much ‘on the ball’. It is splendid that many modern and contemporary composers all over the world are writing wonderfully entertaining and exciting music specifically for percussionists, expanding the sound palette in so many eye and ear popping ways. Some of these pieces are as exciting to watch as to listen to and on Friday, Dr Lisa Nicol introduced five such pieces that her splendid team of young musicians were about to play.

Three of them, Euan MacDonald, Morven Hollick and Joy Smith along with Dr Lisa Nicol herself performed part one of the most celebrated of these works, ‘Drumming’ by Steve Reich (b. 1936). The fantastic programme note described how the piece builds up. There was a row of small drums, bongos perhaps, and our four performers stood, two on either side making up a square. Lisa herself sparked off the performance with just a few single beats and gradually the others came in. Two of the performers were steadily there, the other two came in and out at different moments. As often with Reich's music the full sound becomes greater than the sum of its parts. Is this like fractals? I am not sure but the patterns of sound created were amazing. The Butchart also added its own part to the sound with its echoes that became almost like the drone sound that you get from groups of bagpipe players. Would Reich have liked that? If not in this piece, he would probably have wanted to exploit it in some other way. This was just the beginning of some of the most amazing sights and sounds we were about to experience.

The second piece was very different. ‘The Old Pond’ by the American percussionist and composer Nathan Daughtrey (b. 1975) played by Peter Ney on vibraphone and Joy Smith on Marimba was a rather gentle, tuneful and atmospheric piece that as the programme note said, ‘captures the many wonderful memories of fishing with his grandfather with bamboo poles and live worms in the old pond behind his grandparents’ house’. I thought it was a very colourful and delightful piece in which the contrasting timbres of vibraphone and marimba were brought together so nicely by Peter and Joy.

The next two pieces were as marvellous to watch as to hear. I wonder how I would have reacted hearing the music on a CD without being able to see how the sounds were being made – a totally different musical experience I think. ‘Third Construction’ by John Cage (1912 – 1992) was performed by a quartet of percussionists, Peter Ney, Brodie McCash, Eden Mikula and Murray Bartle but the range of sounds they had often at their fingertips or with sticks was just amazing. Eden had a conch shell to blow several times, Peter and Brodie had lion’s roars produced by pulling a wet cloth over a string or wire attached to a drum. Murray had a whole range of different small Latin American instruments, I used to order and sell some of those when I worked in a music shop. Peter had a kind of whirring rattle and I watched him count these entries with great precision. There were also tuned tin cans, a large paint tin and so much more. Watching as well as listening to the performance was a real delight. If I had seen this when I was a small boy, it would have seemed better than a circus and I would have wanted to build my own percussion orchestra when I got back home.

The next piece, ‘Musique de Table’ by the Belgian musician and film maker Thierry de May was equally entertaining to watch. To further that impression, the main lights in the Butchart were extinguished while spots were trained on the three performers, Brodie McCash, Peter Ney and Joy Smith. Although the title of the piece is Table Music it was actually the performers’ hands that were the focus of interest. They stroked the table, clapped, struck the table, put their fingers on the table with hands front and back and so on. I noticed that one of the special studies of the composer was contemporary dance and this piece had been very carefully choreographed. The three performers worked often precisely together or occasionally apart.

‘Feast’ by the Canadian composer, pianist and bassoonist Bill Douglas (b. 1944) being for several tuned percussion instruments was more tuneful and even had the performers singing near the end. Most of the other performers who had not yet performed were on stage for this piece. It made an attractive conclusion to a fantastic performance. The UoA Percussion Ensemble are still one of the real sources of pride for Aberdeen University Music.