On Saturday, as usual, this was a concert of two halves shared between the University Wind Band and Concert Band. What, you might ask, is the difference between a Wind Band and a Concert Band? Well, nothing really. Both groups could also be called a Symphonic Band, a Wind Orchestra, a Wind Symphony depending whether we are in the United States or not. In the case of the two wind orchestras we heard on Saturday, they use different expressions for the same thing in order to distinguish between the University of Aberdeen Wind Band in which all the members have been auditioned and represent the University’s most accomplished wind and percussion players. The Concert Band is a community band focusing as much on fun and the sociable side of music making. Oh, you might say, the Concert Band will not be as good then? Well, tonight’s performance by both bands kicks that idea right off the pitch. A goodly number of the Wind Band players are also in the Concert Band but it is a very much bigger organisation, one hundred and two players, as conductor Ashley Edwards told us. The music they play is perhaps not quite as complex and it is full of good tunes – actually there were an astonishing number of those in Saturday’s concert as you will discover.

First off was the Wind Band under their conductor Jack Christie. Jack was the winner of the Carlaw/Ogston Conducting Bursary enabling him to attend the Peter Fender Conducting Course in London. It is great that this important skill is being seriously taught these days. When I was a student you could just pick up a stick and start wagging it at a band or an orchestra. Some were lucky and it worked – others were not. No names, no pack drills.

The Wind Band opened their performance with a splendid overture piece, Jack Curnow’s Toward the Sun Rising. The different sections of the band blended together deliciously but sometimes the different sections played almost as solo groups standing out above the others. In this piece there were fine solos too, the single oboe and one of the trumpets for instance. The piece worked splendidly towards its climax introducing the band to the audience in glowing fashion.

Among the finest pieces for wind band are Gustav Holst’s Two Suites Op.28 for Military Band, yet another way of describing the Wind Band. On Saturday we heard the First Suite in E Flat. The piece opened with a melody on the bass instruments that made its way through the entire band reaching a magnificent climax. The second movement highlighted the woodwinds in a folksy song and dance. The finale had the drive and punch of a military march and involved complex contrapuntal playing delivered splendidly by the band.

The American composer Frank Ticheli composed his American Elegy as a memorial to those killed in the tragic Columbine massacre. The tenor horn and French horns played beautifully and later the clarinets and oboe but the highlight of the piece was the sound of the disembodied offstage trumpet solo played with real depth of feeling by Rachel Bailey.
Aaron Copland’s Hoedown from Rodeo was a splendid way to lift the spirits again then Jack Christie introduced the Band’s final piece, Cry of the Celts based on music for the Michael Flatley dance spectacular. Early on we heard a snatch of the famous Shaker Hymn, Simple Gifts, but the piece ended magnificently with Victory – a wonderful exposition of the song Lord of The Dance. Allow me here to express my appreciation of the Band’s fantastic percussion section. They should never be forgotten.

The Concert band conducted by Ashley Edwards opened in glowing and perfectly disciplined style with their performance of the John Philip Sousa Classic Semper Fidelis arranged by Harold R. Gore.

Music - that was the title - arranged by Philip Spark was based on a popular song Music was my first Love by John Miles – it had a rock beat and many in the band added to the rhythmic impact by clapping with the beat.

Frank Ticheli’s Rest based on a larger work, There will be Rest, was a gentler piece sensitively played by the band. Their large drifts of woodwind and brass blended nicely.

Then it was off to the cinema for the next two pieces. The title theme from the film The Big Country by Jerome Moross has become a band classic and if anything it sounds better with the clarinets replacing the violins at the beginning in this arrangement by Leslie Statham.

Disney at the Movies arranged by John Higgins contained no fewer than fourteen melodies from the films including Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah from Song of the South and Mrs Potts’s song from Beauty and the Beast originally sung by Angela Lansbury. Let me once again complement the Band’s splendid large percussion section here.

A shortened arrangement of the Carl Jenkins hit Palladio by Robert Longfield worked splendidly before we were back in the mood of Westerns with Jay Bocook’s Shackleford Banks subtitled Tale of the Wild Mustangs. Shackleford Banks is an island off the North Carolina Coast. Google it and you will see the wild horses playing on the beach.

The Band’s encore was actually called Encore: Instant Concert, by Harold L. Walters. It takes you on a dizzying helter-skelter ride across thirty well known melodies including Christmas carols and Hava Nagila. How do I know there were thirty? I cheated, I looked it up – such is the magic of the internet. Anyway the Band played it absolutely splendidly – a fantastic conclusion to an entrancing concert.