

## **Jazz Piano meets Pipe Organ**

*with Roger Williams (pipe organ) and Neil Birse (jazz piano)*

### **St Machar's Cathedral, Aberdeen**

Friday 1<sup>st</sup> November 2019

#### **Programme**

|                   |  |
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| Tim Raymond       | <i>The Flowering Cross</i> (Scottish premiere) |
| Mary Lou Williams | <i>Ode to St Cecile</i>                        |
| Joseph Stollery   | <i>The Squabble of Mews</i> (world premiere)   |
| Neil Birse        | free improvisation                             |
| George Gershwin   | <i>Variations and Fugue on So am I</i>         |

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#### **Programme notes**

Over many years I have been fascinated by the subject of improvisation and how it means completely different things to different people. Some of these differences are, of course, due to training and orientation, but throughout the ages improvisation has played an important role in performing music and in elaborating basics. Whether it is attempting to conjure up a lost secular tradition of organ playing – as in the Middle Ages – or more circumspectedly adding trills and other ornaments to fully written out parts as, for example, in the Baroque era – the importance of a momentary inspiration to add, to give a new emphasis to a phrase, is what separates a play-through from a real living performance. When turning to Jazz and its many manifestations in the twentieth and twenty first centuries, improvisation takes on a whole new importance, as the balance between given material and end result is redefined. With some Western avant garde music – as for example *Aus dem Die Sieben Tagen* by Stockhausen, or *Volumina* by Ligeti in which 'scores' there are no notes at all – the element of improvisation is integral to any authentic performance. At this point the links with techniques of jazz performance are very close indeed.

In today's programme we have decided not to blur the lines quite so closely, but to show how both stylistic and harmonic journeys of repertoire for Jazz Piano and Pipe Organ have sometimes moved very close to each other. I also wanted to juxtapose some craggy new sounds with something that has a different appeal, in the expectation that such a contrast may be challenging and rewarding both to the audience and to us as performers.

'No man is an island' and as we all go about our daily task of living in the twenty first century, our ears are challenged in all sorts of ways. This concert is designed to share, for a short period of 40 minutes or so, some of that variety, to see what sort of connections we might make – harmonically, rhythmically, emotionally, and ideologically. (RBW)

### **Tim Raymond *The Flowering Cross* (Scottish premiere)**

*The Flowering Cross* is the second in a projected series of pieces based on the ancient Irish Gaelic *Lament of the Three Marys* – an imaginary dialogue between Mary and Peter at the Crucifixion. My piece is articulated in a meta-language derived consistently – though sometimes inscrutably – from its elements. Its rhythmic complexity reflects the complexity and freedom from conventional pulsation which I have observed in folk singers.

The piece begins at a point of crisis, as if we had suddenly entered a film at its mid-point, and winds down through a series of contrasting – and increasingly melodic – episodes to a statement of the Lament melody. The ensuing passage, marked in the score 'Like an interruption', builds unexpectedly to a varied recapitulation of the opening. This time, the critical knot of sound unravels into an extended melody-based *cantilena* – the musical metaphor of the poetical metaphor which provides the title: the legend that, at Christ's death, the cross (or 'tree') burst into blossom. (TR)

### **Mary Lou Williams *Ode to St Cecile***

Mary Lou Williams was a jazz pianist from Atlanta, Georgia. Born in 1910, she was from a large family and entirely self-taught. By the age of six, she was renowned throughout Pittsburgh as "The Little Piano Girl", performing at parties for "white-society people". In 1924 she spent the summer touring with a black vaudeville show after their pianist failed to show up. Williams's career spanned over half a century, and in that time she helped to define Stride, Big Band and Boogie-Woogie. Mary Lou Williams was a prolific writer, composing and playing for bandleaders such as Duke Ellington, Benny Goodman, Earl Hines and Tommy Dorsey. Hugely influential, Williams also mentored and befriended Thelonious Monk, Bud Powell, Tadd Dameron, Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker. These younger musicians went on to become the key creators of the jazz style "Bebop". Williams recorded over one hundred records, including her harmonically ground-breaking work "The Zodiac Suite". A devoted Catholic, she also wrote three masses and one cantata. Throughout her career, Williams repeatedly re-invented her craft, and remained at the forefront of Jazz's constantly evolving styles. Popularly known as "The First Lady of the Jazz Keyboard", her life's work stands testament to the tremendous influence that she has had over shaping the world of jazz.

This piece is ether misspelt and written for St. Cecilia, the patron Saint of Music and Musicians, or written in connection with Saint Cecile Cathedral in

Albi, France. I suspect the latter, as between 1952-1954 she spent time living and travelling in Europe.

### **Joseph Stollery *The Squabble of Mews (world premiere)***

The title of this piece is essentially an alternative way of describing a flock of seagulls, and much of the musical material in it is taken from the vocalisations of these birds. Having lived near the coast for a while and hence familiarising myself with these rather infamous characters, I felt that the organ, with its wide variety of stops, could very well emulate the unique sounds they produce, from low sharp staccato cackling, to high raucous squeals, amongst many others. These calls come together to provide plenty of opportunities for counterpoint and timbral contrast, in a piece that is at once both dramatic and humorous. (JS)

### **George Gershwin *Variations and Fugue on So am I***

So that we have an opportunity of playing together we decided to take one of Gershwin's 'standards' and add some variations. To start with we have adapted a piano-roll version of this song made by the composer and transcribed by George Litterest edited and arranged by Artis Wodehouse. We shall play this but further adapted for the Piano and Organ, but in turns and together. Thereafter, we shall take it in turns to add variations before moving to a fugue using the first phrase of the song as its subject. In the spirit of the **soundfestival** this will be a new and novel way of exploring some of the vast potential of this material.

## **Biographies**

Aberdeen born **Neil Birse** is a classically trained jazz pianist. He recently graduated from the Guildhall School of Music and Drama and has been involved in various projects in Scotland, London and abroad. He is passionate about performance and music education, and has led group workshops in schools and privately. Prior to Guildhall, Neil was pianist for the National Youth Jazz Orchestra of Scotland, touring for several years around the UK. Artists he toured with during this time included; Liane Carroll, Tim Garland, Mike Walker, Ian Dixon and Chris Bachelor. Teachers whilst at Guildhall include Nikki Isles, Malcolm Edmonstone, Jason Rebello, Gareth Williams and Steve Watts. Whilst at Guildhall, Neil was pianist and assistant MD to the Guildhall Jazz Singers and performed regularly throughout London. Post Guildhall, Neil has continued working regularly with various singers and musicians, live and in studio, as well as teaching on national piano workshops.

**Roger B. Williams** is the Director of Music and Organist to the Cathedral Church of St. Machar in Old Aberdeen. Born in Swansea, he received his first musical education at Huddersfield School of Music (now part of the

University) before graduating B Mus. With first class Hons from Cardiff University. After researching the early works of Arnold Schoenberg at King's College Cambridge, he had a free lance career in London as an organist, harpsichordist, conductor, composer and singer. For five years he was Chorus Master to the Scottish National Orchestra. His researches into collections of music at country houses and castles in the North East have yielded many CDs and a performance for the late Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother. He has several made CDs by Chandos, Hyperion, Alpha, Top Note and Cantoris Records. Recent recitals have been at St Stephan's Cathedral, Vienna, Union Chapel in London, King's College Cambridge, and at Bolton Priory, Yorkshire. He has given an annual recital of specially commissioned works at each annual Sound Festival and today's recital continues this tradition. He received an MBE from Her Majesty the Queen for his Services to Music in 2009, and an Honorary D.Mus from University of Aberdeen two years later.

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