

***CULTS PARISH CHURCH RECITAL GROUP
“MUSIC IN THE SANCTUARY”***

In association with:

THE SOUND FESTIVAL 2011

CHRISTOPHER BAXTER Piano

CULTS PARISH CHURCH

Sunday, 30 October 2011

In the introductory remarks to his recital on Sunday, Christopher Baxter explained that his choice of programme was designed to show how certain composers had made great leaps in expanding the range of sounds possible in music for keyboard instruments, in particular the piano. This explained why Bach and Beethoven were included in a programme of otherwise American trailblazing composers. It was Bach whose two books each of twenty four preludes and fugues in every major and minor key opened up the prospect for keyboard players to work in every key on the same instrument.

Beethoven broadened out the range of colour and expression on the piano with his 32 piano sonatas (not including the earlier unnumbered ones). It is no wonder then that these two milestones in keyboard literature are a must for every serious pianist. Christopher Baxter began his recital with Bach's *Prelude and Fugue in B Major No.23* from Book 1, BWV868. Near the end of his life Bach did come face to face with a fortepiano which apparently did not impress him much so the keyboard instruments for which Bach was composing were incapable of the expressive powers of a modern piano. However, stringed and wind instruments and voices for which Bach often composed certainly were, so his music often incorporated deep emotional expressiveness, the *St. Matthew Passion* for instance. I think therefore we can accept the element of romantic expression with which Christopher Baxter imbued his performance of Bach's *Prelude and Fugue* on Sunday. I thought it was approached with considerable taste and decorum. In any case it was an ideal introduction for the piece that Baxter segued into immediately afterwards. This was Henry Cowell's *Aeolian Harp*. The chords are decidedly Bachian but they were produced by running the fingers across the strings of the piano as if it were an autoharp.

Beethoven's *Piano Sonata No.28 in A Major Op.101* has its opening movement marked "with warmest feeling" by the composer and Christopher Baxter's beautifully delicate performance brought out the relaxed sense of simplicity in the music that I think Beethoven would have wanted. The lively spiky march rhythms of the second movement made a splendid contrast before the sense of longing suggested in the brief slow movement led into a sturdy performance of the finale. Christopher Baxter's performance did indeed demonstrate the wide range of expression that Beethoven provided for the piano.

The name John Cage instantly conjures up wild experimentation in music but *In a Landscape*, composed while Cage was hosting a festival of music by Erik Satie is startlingly approachable. Meditative and hypnotic, it had something of the simplicity and fascination with pure sound that Satie's music also contains.

With his performance of George Crumb's *A Little Suite for Christmas, A.D. 1979*, Christopher Baxter wins the prize for the first Christmas performance of 2011 in Aberdeen. This piece uses an expanded palette of piano sounds with strings plucked strummed or damped inside the piano but these techniques are not the whole story, rather they are added on to more traditional techniques in a very logical and tasteful way. The mystical sounds of the opening movement, *The Visitation*, suggested something of Messiaen's sound world. *Nativity Dance* was exciting and the *Canticle of the Holy Night* with its otherworldly quotation of the Coventry Carol was beautifully done.

The final composer in the concert, Samuel Adler was born in Mannheim in Germany but his family, being Jewish, very sensibly fled to the USA in 1939 when the composer was 11 or 12 years old. I think, therefore, we can include him alongside the other American composers. His *Canto VIII* was the grittiest and most angular piece in the programme and it was brilliantly played by Christopher Baxter whom we must thank for his enlightening, appealing and thoroughly accomplished contribution to sound 2011.

© Alan Cooper 2011