

***THE SOUND FESTIVAL 2011***  
***ABERDEEN ARTS CENTRE***  
***THE LEMON TREE***  
***ABERDEEN ART GALLERY***  
***Saturday, 22 October 2011***

***KEYNOTE SPEECH – JONATHAN CROSS***

A very busy day of Sound events began with the Keynote Speech in Aberdeen Arts Centre given this year by Professor Jonathan Cross of Oxford University and entitled “New Music: Is anybody listening?”. This fascinating slant on the subject was possibly the best yet, entertaining, witty, challenging and wonderfully informative.

Professor Cross began by asking what constitutes new music and of course, a mere glance through the Sound festival programme demonstrates that the possibilities are almost infinite. He began with something that would be a superb essay subject for music students – what does the music of Jennifer Lopez have in common with that of Karlheinz Stockhausen? You might think – nothing whatsoever, but of course both make extensive use of electronics. There are of course differences. J. Lo’s music sells glamour, sex and personality to a vast audience of mostly young people while Stockhausen is not really sexy at all and his audience is far more specialised and limited although looking at the Sound festival audiences this morning they are not necessarily all that old.

Professor Cross went on to open our eyes to the fact that over the centuries, music has had a mutually formative relationship with the venues in which it is exposed to its audiences; the church for Bach, the houses of the aristocracy for Haydn and to some extent Mozart and Beethoven and then for nineteenth century composers the great Victorian concert halls such as the Albert Hall. Nowadays recordings, the internet and who knows what is to come can bring music to any number of people anywhere. I myself have been to the New York Metropolitan Opera but in the Cinema in Belmont Street Aberdeen. As Professor Cross explained, buildings have even been created to house musical works and as we were to discover later, sound festival events in different venues had very different impacts.

Finally, Professor Cross returned to the question, is anybody listening? He made reference to Milton Babbitt who aimed at just himself and possibly a few like minded composers and musical scientists. Cross compared that with the ideas of John Cage for whom music was everything, the audience was everybody and everybody in the world was his or her own composer. Thank you Professor Cross for a wonderfully entertaining and enlightening lecture which cast a fresh light on the rest of the day’s events.

***VIRIDIAN QUARTET***

The first of these in the Lemon Tree was a performance by the Viridian Quartet. David Fennessy’s Graft was a series of minimalist flavoured explorations of the different sounds and textures generated within the bounds of the string quartet.

Different instruments and techniques were highlighted and Fennessy's magical touch with rhythm was for me an especially attractive feature.

Adam Campbell and Jodi Cave joined the Quartet with guitar and clarinet providing a fairly minimal (not minimalist) addition to the ensemble. Slow moving and very quiet, I am not certain whether the composers appreciated the throbbing rhythms coming through from elsewhere in the Lemon Tree but their piece which used live instruments as a fully merged part of pre recorded electronics was an interesting idea.

### ***ROSS WHYTE***

It was on to Aberdeen Art Gallery and to Ross Whyte's Memorial in the ideally atmospheric venue of the Memorial Court within the Art Gallery. Here, the venue was indeed an important part of the musical experience. Recorded testimonials by the survivors of war were played against a background of ambient recordings made within the Memorial Court and Art Gallery. The section I heard described the sinking of two convoy ships and the background sounds suggested sea waves and the creaking of metal, a suitable counterpoint to the story. I spoke to one of the Gallery attendants who told me she had found the experience deeply moving.

### ***SCOTTISH CLARINET QUARTET***

Then it was back to The Lemon Tree to hear the Scottish Clarinet Quartet in four pieces all of them for four bass clarinets. At first, that idea seemed like some sort of musical joke but as we discovered, the bass clarinet has a surprisingly wide upper range so that the ensemble produced a wholly acceptable instrumental choir. This was particularly evident in Downwarp by Oliver Searle. The opening revealed rather melancholy but quite beautiful chords which were followed by a sizzling scherzo-like passage before the soft chords returned while a soloist cavorted stylishly above them as a kind of reference to the more lively section.

In Confetti Medley – Slowing down study by David Fennessy soft long held notes on the clarinets provided a background to two “music boxes” which gradually tinkled their way to a standstill. I sometimes look after two small children who each have what they call “my music” – “Please don't forget to put on my music Uncle Alan”. This slows down in precisely the same way but I don't know whether Fennessy was inspired by such things.

Scathach (The Lady of Shadows) by Sadie Harrison was inspired by the dual ideas of granite and martial arts, the latter possibly a unique source of inspiration for a musician. The music certainly was both hard centred and full of muscular activity. This unusual concert began with Anna Meredith's Four to the Floor also a lively and active piece which I would like to hear again because to begin with, I was wholly taken up marvelling at the upper reaches of sound to which the bass clarinets could so easily leap having been used to the plummy depths of sound which most late nineteenth or early twentieth century composers seek solely from this instrument.