

MUSIC IN THE UNIVERSITY

In association with:

THE SOUND FESTIVAL 2011 and JAM

St. MACHAR'S CATHEDRAL, ABERDEEN

Saturday, 22 October 2011

Despite a perverse attempt by Aberdeen City Roads Department to sabotage the event by closing off any possible access to St. Machar's Cathedral, a reasonably large audience did manage somehow to get to Saturday night's mammoth choral extravaganza in the Cathedral. After last year's highly successful collaboration between JAM and the Sound Festival, once again Aberdeen University Chamber Choir, Edinburgh University Chamber Choir and the University of St. Andrews Chapel Choir were brought together under the expert direction of Michael Bawtree to present a selection of exciting contemporary choral music.

As Professor Jonathan Cross revealed in his lecture this morning, contemporary music can mean many things. Never before in the history of the world has music had so many different voices to offer and the composers in last night's concert were remarkable for their ability to take a more conventional palette of musical colours and imbue it with a vibrant freshness and imagination which many twentieth century composers thought had been totally exhausted. Composers like Paul Mealor (b.1975), Phillip Cooke (b. 1980) and Jonathan Dove (b. 1959) are all contemporary masters of the new imagining of traditional music.

Benjamin Britten is no longer a contemporary figure but he too in his day re-imagined traditional harmonies and melodies and put them to dazzlingly fine use in one of his greatest sacred pieces, Rejoice in the Lamb which opened the concert. This featured the magnificent full choir along with virtuoso organist Tom Wilkinson (University of St. Andrews) also making a welcome return to Aberdeen after last year's concert. The vocal soloists were Claire Seaton (soprano), Rebecca Afonwy-Jones (mezzo), Iain Paton (tenor) and Michael de Souza (baritone) so a particularly fine line-up there too.

One of the secrets of a superlatively fine choir such as we heard last night is that it contains absolutely no passengers. As a result even the relatively quiet passages in the opening section of Rejoice in the Lamb had a fullness of sound that gave the text a special impact. Dynamic contrasts throughout the work were especially effective and crescendos were gloriously exciting in the choir and in Tom Wilkinson's magnificent organ bursts too. The solo singing was exemplary and the final sections of the work stupendously exciting.

Paul Mealor must have been walking on air after hearing the choir's performance of his beautiful settings entitled Now Sleeps the Crimson Petal. In the opening section it was as if the choir had become one wholly integrated instrument like an organ of voices. Jillian Bain Christie's solo in the second poem was a shining triumph. The female voices fluttered beautifully in Upon a Bank with Roses and the finale, A Spotless Rose was among the most moving music I have heard. Later in the concert, Mealor's Ubi Caritas was given a performance worthy of its outing for the Royal Wedding in Westminster Abbey.

Invocation by Phillip Cooke uses the poem Adelstrop by Edward Thomas as its text. Cooke sets this wonderfully evocative poem for choir, soprano soloist and trumpet. The result redoubles the impact of the words expressing the warmth of the June day, the solo blackbird and finally the choir of “all the birds of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire.

Mention of the trumpet soloist brings me to the contribution to the concert of Pure Brass. As an introduction to their first piece the choir sang O Nata Lux, the motet by Thomas Tallis a great musical innovator in his own day. With failing sight I first misread the title of Rory Boyle’s piece as Tallis Light, so what I heard surprised me. It is of course Tallis’s Light in which Boyle takes Tallis’s harmonies and creates an amazingly powerful, even aggressive conversation between brass and organ culminating in the brass players giving a true account of the motet itself while with strident fortissimo chords the organ punctuates it with increasingly terrifying harmonic hammer blows.

Two Cairns by Stuart MacRae was the second contribution from Pure Brass. Its closing chorale was particularly effective. The final piece in the concert, The Far Theatricals of Day a setting of poems by Emily Dickinson brought together all the performers, choir, soloists, organ and brass. It made for a perfect ending to the concert since in so many ways this piece chimes back to Britten’s Rejoice in the Lamb. Both poets Christopher Smart and Emily Dickinson are remarkable for the startling unpredictability of their language and imagery and both Britten and Dove succeed in amplifying the words with equally colourful and surprising music. The opening section for soprano and trumpet, the use of two semi-choirs, one male one female at opposite sides of the cathedral, the rich chording of the four soloists in Talk not to me of summer Trees the murmured whispers of the accompanying choir and the extraordinary ending, Good Morning – Midnight all proved not that there is nothing new in music but that surely there always can be and Sound will always have an endless supply of fresh meat to chew on!