

***THE SOUND FESTIVAL 2011***  
***SOS, SEA OF SOULS***  
***A Salute to the Lifeboatmen of Fraserburgh***  
***ABERDEEN MARITIME MUSEUM***  
***Saturday, 29 October 2011***

I have to confess that to begin with, I found the ambient noise in the Maritime Museum a bit overwhelming but fortunately as Saturday afternoon's programme progressed, my brain began to filter it out. The music was louder anyway and many of the regular patrons who had not expected music began to listen in as well. Visually however, it was certainly the ideal venue for the theme of this performance which was a celebration of the lives and work of the Fraserburgh Lifeboatmen.

It was particularly pleasing that this performance included in its opening and closing items the eager participation of local young performers aged 9 – 14. These included a talented young piper, a guitarist, a clarinet player and two highland dancers. Their opening gambit, *Marconi Marvels*, an old style radio show, included some of the culture of the Fraserburgh area in the broadest sense, a snifter of country and western, gospel and a more substantial helping of pipe music and dancing.

Patrick M. Keenan's piece *The Sheet is Now Unfolding* featured virtuoso clarinetist Joanna Nicholson backed by herself with a laptop controlled delay/repeat accompaniment, which built itself into a choir of clarinet sounds.

Three pieces by piper Robert Aitken began with two pre-recorded items. In the first, *PC Radiode*, static and the faint sounds of a satellite, such as ships today use to find their position at sea, were gradually covered by the sounds of a pipe tune. Perhaps this suggested the ship against the vastness of the ocean? His second recorded piece, *PC Last Footsteps of Home*, recalled the fact that the ocean was the main portal of the journey made by Scottish exiles leaving the home country for the last time during the Highland Clearances. The sounds of guitar, pipes, the voice of a young girl and sea waves painted a poignant sound picture.

Robert Aitken's final piece, *PC Piobaireachd* was performed live on an electronic chanter which worked particularly well, I thought, in the Maritime Museum acoustic where the volume could be adjusted to perfection. The description of Piobaireachd at the end of the following piece described perfectly what we heard:

*"Essentially a set of variations on a ground, the form exploits the virtuosity of the performer in a progression of more and more complex decorative figures to the point where the steady insistent pulse is disrupted by the sheer weight of notes to be played"*. That was it in a nutshell.

The magnificent climax of the concert came in the next piece, *Nine Days Piobaireachd for clarinet* by the Scottish composer William Sweeney. This set of ever more complex and thrillingly gymnastic variations played with effortless brilliance by Joanna Nicholson had just about everything in it from classic Piobaireachd to avant garde and jazz. The title refers to the nine days of the 1926 General Strike in Britain and Joanna Nicholson represented that by progressing round

the central core of the building in stages as she played. If nothing else, her performance was a tour de force of memory.

The concert ended with the piece which gave its title to the whole event, *SOS Sea of Souls*. The youngsters were back in the limelight and the track included the Morse Code distress signal and the recorded voice of Victor Sutherland coxswain of the Fraserburgh Lifeboat, leader of those who save so many souls “at peril on the sea”.

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