

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN MUSIC PRIZE 2011
In association with:
THE SOUND FESTIVAL 2011
A COMPOSER PORTRAIT OF JULIAN ANDERSON

INTERVIEWED BY Dr EDWARD CAMPBELL

With

SCOTT DICKINSON Viola, SIMON SMITH Piano
JOANNA NICHOLSON Clarinet

KING'S COLLEGE CHAPEL

Saturday, 05 November 2011

Dr Edward Campbell, lecturer in Musicology at Aberdeen University presented a Composer Portrait of Julian Anderson, this year's judge of the University of Aberdeen Music Prize. Three of Anderson's finest chamber works were to be performed along with an introduction to each of these in which Dr Campbell interviewed the composer about his life and work as a composer and about the three pieces themselves.

It is always fascinating to learn about the formative years of a composer. Julian Anderson was born into a family of accomplished amateur musicians, especially his father, who was a doctor. As Julian Anderson explained, the medical profession provides a sanctuary for many gifted musicians. As a result of his father's interest, the Anderson home was a treasure house of recordings of classical music and the young Julian was already familiar with the core repertoire long before he ever attended a live concert. At a young age, even when the music was not actually playing on the gramophone, it was forever playing inside young Julian's head and before long it was not only the familiar repertoire that was playing, new pieces imagined by Anderson himself were taking shape in there. Unfortunately, he did not yet know how to write these down on paper but he decided that he was going to study music properly and become a composer.

His first great teacher was John Lambert, himself a pupil of the famous Nadia Boulanger. Which composer at that time did not have lessons from her? Lambert himself became a kind of English Nadia Boulanger because so many important English composers began their careers studying with him: Oliver Knussen, David Fanshawe, and Mark-Anthony Turnage were all mentioned by Anderson. Later on, he was to continue his studies with Alexander Goehr, originally reluctantly, but later enthusiastically. Goehr once said to him that while he himself approached the business of composition from an intellectual perspective, Anderson's approach was aural. This certainly cast light on the orchestral work *Eden* which was played on Friday by the BBC SSO and there was something of that approach too in the first of the three chamber pieces we were to hear, *Prayer for solo viola* (2009) in a masterful performance by Scott Dickenson.

Julian Anderson explained that Prayer in this piece was not the Christian ideal of quiet meditation; it was closer to the passionate, even angry dialogue with God that happens in the Jewish religion. A long introductory section of the music had the kind of passionate unfettered outpouring heard in the singing of the Jewish cantor, fluent, ornate and bursting with emotional intensity. As the work progressed, harmonics, double stopping, slides and rhythmic potency emerged to give a vast range of colours to the music underlining exactly what Alexander Goehr had said about Anderson's approach to composing.

His music however is in no way bereft of intellectual rigour as we heard in the three *Piano Etudes* played with incisive brilliance by Simon Smith. The third study however did also have a strong element of instrumental colour. Like yesterday's *Eden*, the sound of bells rang out clearly in the piano writing.

The final piece we were to hear had the fascinating title *The Bearded Lady for piano and clarinet*. Last Saturday in the Maritime Museum we heard the amazing clarinet playing of Joanna Nicholson and here she was again giving a fabulously excoriating performance of this piece along with Simon Smith. The rhythmic writing in this piece is more than a little terrifying but this duo played it as if it were the easiest thing in the world. Good composers always need good performers. Julian Anderson gave each of his musicians a big hug. Had he been more of a social innocent like Anton Bruckner, he might have tipped them the price of a glass of beer. Hans Richter had one thaler pressed into his hand by the composer. He did not buy a beer with it; instead he wore it on his watch chain ever after. In our inflated times of course, Anderson would have had to part with considerably more money.

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