

ABERDEEN UNIVERSITY MUSIC PRIZE 2011

In association with:

THE SOUND FESTIVAL 2011

THE COWDRAY HALL

Sunday, 06 November 2011

The Gala Concert marking the culmination of the University of Aberdeen Music Prize was held as usual in the Cowdray Hall. Professor Albert Rodger, Vice Principal for External Affairs welcomed everyone to the event which as he said has become one of the most sought after prizes for composers internationally as evidenced by the fact that this year there were over four hundred submissions from forty different countries. As Professor Rodger said, Aberdeen University has been at the forefront as an International Centre for the Arts since its foundation over five hundred years ago. Today, with over 250 students, Aberdeen University Music is stronger than it has ever been.

Professor Paul Mealor, Professor of Composition introduced the five musicians who were to play the pieces which had been shortlisted for the competition, Alastair Savage and Amy Cardigan, violins, Andrew Berridge, viola, Alison Lawrance, cello and the man who was in some respects the special star of the evening, trumpeter Mark O'Keefe.

The first piece to be performed was *Circles of Time* by Dr Shai Cohen from Israel. This came across as a trumpet concerto in miniature, an impression that was enhanced by the fact that Mark O'Keefe played it standing up and therefore in a sense separate from the other musicians. As was the case with the other three composers who had used the trumpet, mutes were employed both to provide a wider range of sounds and to create a more equal balance between trumpet and strings. In his piece however Shai Cohen sometimes let the trumpet have full reign and Mark O'Keefe gave us some beautifully pure sounding crescendos on the instrument.

Later on in the piece, more adventurous techniques - flutter tonguing and swoops, which were reflected in the colourful string writing, were brought to the fore. I liked both the harmonic writing for strings as in the opening chords and the fanfare-like interludes for trumpet.

Quintet by Christophe Looten from France managed in his writing to incorporate the sounds of the trumpet into the ensemble far more closely. This was achieved partly by the use of different mutes including one more often heard in jazz pieces, a kind of skeletal sound. I liked the way that this floated above a softer string background which without this type of mute would not have worked so well. Later on a different mute producing a brittle sound was used against incisive stabbing strings with fascinating rhythmic writing. I was reminded a little bit of Hindemith who happens to be one of my favourite composers. This and the fact that I thought this the best piece from a purely structural viewpoint suggested that he "could have been a contender", if I may quote from *On the Waterfront*.

Autana III by Azusa Yomogida from Japan used softer coloured harmonies in her string writing. This was so far the most atmospheric piece and I liked the way that in she allotted short cadenza-like passages to everyone thus giving each of the instruments its moment in the sun.

Zvonimir Nagy, originally from Croatia but now living and working in the USA, gave us a piece, *Ayres*, inspired by an Elizabethan poem. Here the trumpet was used to add lovely touches of colour to predominant string writing. After a lively exchange between trumpet and strings the music became a series of broken utterances and the first section ended in soft string sighs and just breath blown into the trumpet. A fresh section then followed with pizzicato strings, brittle trumpet sounds and spiccato string bowing leading to an explosive ending.

I was fascinated by how each of these composers had used subtly different techniques in order to balance the power of the trumpet against the more gentle power of the string writing. There was however one young composer who settled the problem in the most radical way, Marc Garcia Vitoria from Spain did not use the trumpet at all. His piece, *Plastic Trio* was written for string trio and it was the most radical piece using extended techniques throughout to produce sounds suggesting the singing of an imaginary insect choir highly unusual and highly abstract. Julian Anderson in his interview on Saturday explained his interest in the purely aural aspects of music so I was not unduly surprised when he chose this piece as the winner of the 2011 University of Aberdeen Music Prize. Marc Garcia Vitoria will receive a £5000 commission to write a full orchestral piece to be performed and possibly broadcast by the BBC SSO next year, so as they say in Spain, Buena Suerte.

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