

MUSIC IN THE UNIVERSITY
In association with:
THE SOUND FESTIVAL 2011
THE AURIGA QUINTET
OF THE LAPLAND CHAMBER ORCHESTRA
KING'S COLLEGE CHAPEL
Tuesday, 08 November 2011

Tuesday evening's concert given by the Auriga Wind Quintet was introduced by Geoff Palmer, one of whose compositions was to be performed by the Ensemble. Geoff Palmer is actually responsible for giving the Ensemble its name and his piece bore the same title, *Auriga – Quintet* (2011). Since the Quintet are all members of the Lapland Chamber Orchestra, their performance represented one of the sound festival's special themes this year: the music of Scandinavia. It is always, I think, really worthwhile to have the opportunity of hearing music by composers from countries that we might not otherwise get a chance to hear and for that we have to give special thanks to Aberdeen University Music and to the sound festival.

The first piece in the concert was by one of Finland's foremost contemporary composers, Kalevi Aho (b.1949): his *Quintet for Winds* (2006). Chiming unison notes played by the entire ensemble began to fan out into fascinating scoring for the contrasting instruments exploring their special timbres: flutter tongued flute, horn aglow or piercingly high notes from the oboe. The second movement was an impish and later troll-like dance with at first, airily light rhythms then intriguing upward runs stomped out by the instruments. The third movement lived up at the outset to its instructions to the musicians, *Marciale*, *pesante* and then, with precipitous ascents and descents of the scale, *Furioso*.

An extra spatial element was added to the music in the finale when the clarinet and oboe moved to the front right of the Chapel and the flute to the front left. Then they returned to their original seats while the bassoon and horn retired to the back of the Chapel for their contribution to the rest of the piece. Even without that, it was an attractive and splendidly interesting piece, played magnificently by the Quintet.

There were more surprises in the next piece, *Music for a Deceased Friend* (1982) by the Latvian composer Peteris Vasks (b.1946). The performers were required to add their singing voices to the instrumental blend. To my ears it sounded like the singing coming from a distant monastery. It was even more inspiring when the one female member of the ensemble, the flautist, added her voice to the singing. The central part of the piece had warm harmonies, almost pastoral in their effect, possibly representing memories of the lost friend while moving on, the music was all aflutter, perhaps representing loss and grief.

I have watched *The Sky at Night* (with its signature tune by Sibelius) since both I and Patrick Moore were young and had hair, but I had obviously not really been paying attention properly because I did not know that Auriga, the title of Geoff Palmer's Quintet was the name of a constellation; apparently it is Latin for The Charioteer because its shape resembles a charioteer's helmet. The five movements in the work

are each named after the principal stars in the constellation, at least two of them binaries orbiting round one another. This was skilfully expressed in the shaping of the instrumental voices in the music. It was not only evident in the first movement *Capella*, which sounds like a musical direction, but is actually Latin for “little she goat” This idea of the instruments orbiting one another was also evident in the second movement, *Menkarlina*, which is Arabic for shoulder. Here the horn played a special part in this *Moto Perpetuo*. *Al Nath*, a nicely constructed *Passacaglia* is Arabic for “the horns of the goat” While *Hassaleh* comes from the Greek for “the Hoof”. This movement provided another wonderful musical surprise because a bell and a Tibetan singing bowl were added to the delightful instrumental colouration. The piece concluded with *Almaaz* which comes from the Arabic word for “Billy goat”. This composition was not only attractive and well constructed, it was fascinating in its delivery and in its background inspiration – I loved it.

Of course, I also loved the final piece in the official programme, Carl Nielsen’s delightful *Wind Quintet*. Beautifully characteristic instrumental writing with a strong melodic patterning marked the opening movement followed by an almost folk-like minuet then after an introduction that served to introduce us to the new sound of cor anglais in place of the oboe, the Finale was a set of contrasting variations on Nielsen’s own hymn tune. Solos for flute, horn bassoon and cor anglais stood out in fine high relief in this delightful set of variations before the hymn tune came back with its simple strength to end the performance.

An enthusiastic reception from the audience brought forth an extract from Incidental music for the play *King Christian II* by the composer who even more than Nielsen broke out of the purely Scandinavian musical orbit and into the international spotlight, namely Jean Sibelius. It was great though to get acquainted with several other Nordic composers along with a colourful new work by our own Geoff Palmer.

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