

**THE SOUND FESTIVAL 2011**  
**GEOFF PALMER Cello**  
**PETE STOLLERY Electronics**  
**THE ATRIUM, THE INSTITUTE OF MEDICAL SCIENCES**  
**UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN**  
**Friday, 04 November 2011**

There is no doubt that both in terms of visual impact and acoustics, the Atrium of the Institute of Medical Sciences at Forresterhill is a splendid concert venue especially if electronics are to be included in the programme. However, the prime function of the building is as a refectory where students can socialise, eat and drink. As a result cellist Geoff Palmer and his audience had to contend with a considerable level of background noise and it would be wrong to blame the students for that since it is in a sense their home ground and we, the concert people, were the interlopers. Perhaps it is best in the circumstances to think of Geoff as being like one of those top class buskers you come across in the Paris Metro so it was still possible to enjoy his performance if you focused your listening powers on his performance and filtered out the background noise.

His was an interesting programme that contained music on three contrasting levels. At the core was J. S. Bach's *Unaccompanied Cello Suite No.4 in Eb BWV1010*, purely abstract music based on dance movements. The opening piece, John Tavener's *Thrinós* is designed to elicit a certain mood of sadness having been composed for the death of a close friend. The title, *Thrinós* which means Lamentation is used in the Greek Orthodox liturgy to express the sorrow of Mary at the death of her son but it can also refer to a song sung over the body of a dead friend. The final piece in the concert, *Petals*, by the Finnish female composer Kaija Saariaho was born out of a piece for string quartet and electronics which was itself inspired by a poem which mentions "a five petalled leaf", hence the title. Using extended cello techniques further enhanced by the subtle use of electronics, this was a splendidly colourful and expressive if abstract sound painting.

Tavener's *Thrinós* was performed from the first gallery behind the listeners. The gentle, prayerfully introspective voice of the cello did just manage to find a way through the background clamour and was eventually persuasive.

For his performance of the Bach Unaccompanied Suite, Geoff Palmer came down and sat in front of the audience. The Eb Suite, as he explained, is one of the most physically challenging to play as this is not a particularly comfortable key for the cello, requiring as it does extended fingering stretches in the left hand. I thought Geoff Palmer gave a particularly fine muscular performance of the *Prelude* and he certainly made the *Bourrées* and *Gigue* go with a certain swing. I noticed the feet of certain people not part of the official audience but sitting nearby were listening and tapping their feet.

In the final piece, *Petals*, the cello was “miked up” and Pete Stollery unobtrusively added a patina of electronics to the sound blend, which expanded the range of the cello without ever getting in its way. Geoff Palmer employed lively fingering and bowing techniques to bring the music to life. Was it that the lunch hour was drawing to an end and people were leaving the Atrium to go back to their studies. Certainly the background sounds were lessening and I would like to believe that this was because more and more people were starting to listen.

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