

MUSIC IN THE UNIVERSITY
In association with:
THE SOUND FESTIVAL 2011
JEREMY HUW WILLIAMS Baritone
NICHOLAS WEARNE Piano
KING'S COLLEGE CHAPEL
Thursday, 03 November 2011

Jeremy Huw Williams, the ever popular Visiting Fellow in Performance at Aberdeen University drew a large crowd to the Chapel for his recital of Scottish première performances by contemporary composers along with world premières of works by pre- graduate and post-graduate music students. It was typical of his generosity towards the new young composers that they were given the opportunity of hearing not just workshops but proper concert performances of their songs. For this occasion, Jeremy Huw Williams was joined at the piano by Nicholas Wearne. I have avoided saying that he was accompanied by Nicolas Wearne because in many of these contemporary songs, the piano had an artistic input every bit as crucial and as challenging as that which was required of the singer. Many of the pieces we were about to hear are staggeringly difficult to perform but they seemed to present no difficulty whatsoever for our two splendidly accomplished musicians.

The first example of this was in the opening song cycle *Twilight*, an earlier work by one of the current supernovas of British music, Paul Mealar. This work, bringing together poems by Peter Davidson, Tennyson and Rabindranath Tagore derives a maximum emotional and atmospheric impact from minimal musical writing. It is a pity that the word minimalism is now used to stand for something quite different in music for this song cycle is truly minimalist in a quite different sense. The vocal writing in the opening song makes telling use of a single repeated note while the brittle piano music on the upper reaches of the keyboard is fractured and fitful and for much of the second song is absent altogether. When it does reappear, its effect is doubly powerful as it underlines only the last words in each line of verse. The final song is full of impetus in the piano and vocal parts, the rhythm reminiscent of a barcarolle. Jeremy Huw Williams gave a splendidly well controlled performance of the piece.

The following piece, *The Soul Candle* by Mark Bowden was stylistically more diffuse. The conclusion of *One day, feeling hungry*, had a magnificent crescendo near its end in which both voice and piano excelled. The rhythmic insistence of *Drought* was powerful and the depiction of birds in the piano writing of *Spring* was distinctive.

Hollow Fires by Michael Berkeley was a song cycle in four episodes. The first song, *Grenadier*, had echoes of some of the military songs in Mahler's *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* and with its attractive folk-like melody, *Drummer Hodge* recalled something of the spirit of Tom Bowling. The final song, *Her Secret*, which deals with the hidden feelings of a woman who has lost her love through war, had a meaningful sense of inscrutability in the piano harmonies.

This piece, having a melancholy aura, Jeremy Huw Williams decided to cheer up the proceedings by singing another Michael Berkeley setting entitled *Ah, are you digging on my grave*. In this song, the digger turns out to be a little dog burying its bone.

After the interval, we heard compositions by five different student composers. What was particularly fascinating was the astonishingly wide range of musical voices represented in these fascinating works.

Im Sturm, a splendidly animated composition by Immanuel Voigt, derived much of its inspiration from Schubert with a touch of Mahler and Voigt could not have chosen a better couple of lieder composers as his models.

Monica Webster's *Go Tell It*, a setting of words by Emily Dickinson, was a more original and personal musical statement in her melodic imagination while Joan Cumming chose Vaughan Williams as the composer of *Silent Noon* as her model but her writing also had a strong element of originality in her attractive musical painting of warmth and optimism.

Misty Mountain by Paul Murray was a splendidly atmospheric setting of the words with an understanding of the power of a simple repeated note in the piano writing. Possibly the most advanced piece and certainly the largest was *The Dying Christian to his soul* by Ed Jones. What is particularly compelling and fascinating in this young composer's music is his ability to take traditional harmonic and melodic writing and give them a constantly fresh and surprising turn.

Cecilia McDowall's setting of Masfield's poem *Christmas Eve at Sea*, was another splendidly atmospheric response to the words with magical depiction of starlight in the piano score and a wonderful rich crescendo in the vocal part at the end.

John Metcalf has set three poems dealing with daffodils including the most famous one by Wordsworth. His music was expansive and romantic with splendidly rich surges of sound from both performers.

Enthusiastic applause brought the duo in a sense back to where they began with a composition by Paul Meallor. This was a delightful arrangement of a Welsh folk lullaby *Suo Gân*, a fine conclusion to a brilliantly compelling and mind expanding recital.

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