

## ***THE UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN MUSIC PRIZE 2011***

***In association with:***

***THE SOUND FESTIVAL 2011***

***BBC SCOTTISH SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA***

***THE MUSIC HALL, ABERDEEN***

***Friday, 04 November 2011***

The fourth University of Aberdeen Music Prize was launched according to custom with a full scale orchestral concert in the Music Hall. The Music Prize which this year can boast over four hundred entries from forty different countries is an international competition for young composers run as a collaborative enterprise between Aberdeen University and the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra who gave this opening concert. The event is also included in the programme of sound, the North East of Scotland's Festival of Contemporary Music.

The music chosen for this launch event was particularly appropriate. Not only did it include a piece by Julian Anderson who is to judge this year's competition but each of the other works in the programme were by composers who can be regarded as being great innovators in music, sometimes changing the very direction that music was to take in following years. It is perhaps too simplistic to argue that Wagner led straight on to Mahler, then to Berg, Schönberg, Webern etc. However there is at least a slender thread of truth in that.

As soon as Ilan Volkov launched his orchestra into the opening bars of Wagner's *Prelude and Liebestod* from *Tristan und Isolde*, the intensity of the playing had already begun to deliver the surging passion of the composer's imaginings. Delicious harmonic collisions from opposing orchestral layers, strings, brass or woodwind were delivered with startling clarity although the overall balance that gave the music its wonderful glossy sheen was never disrupted. The dynamic crescendos as the *Liebestod* reached its climax were breathtaking, the orchestra obviously on top form for this live Radio 3 broadcast.

Still more appropriate for a concert that was to launch a composition competition was the inclusion in the programme of *La Mort de Cléopâtre* by Berlioz. This was one of four pieces that Berlioz entered in different years for the Prix de Rome. He got one second prize and did finally win the first prize but in the year of 1829 when Berlioz entered with *La Mort de Cléopâtre*, the judges decided not to award a prize at all. However, since then, it has become a favourite for sopranos or mezzos and orchestra.

For Friday's performance the BBC Orchestra had chosen as their soloist the brilliant young Romanian operatic mezzo-soprano Ruxandra Donose. With her remarkably powerful yet touchingly beautiful singing she easily bestrode the explosive orchestral surges of Berlioz delivered with brilliant fury by Ilan Volkov and the orchestra. Many of the signature sounds of Berlioz that were later to appear in works like *La Damnation de Faust* were already discernible in this earlier piece. The text was chosen by the Prix de Rome judges not by the composer himself and as poetry it scarcely makes much of a mark but add the music and Friday's magnificent performance and it begins to edge its way towards a kind of greatness.

Julian Anderson's *Eden* was the work which opened the second half of the concert. It used unusual tuning and a technique known as hocketing that comes from Andean pipes for example. The notes of a melody are flung across the orchestra from one instrument to another. The result along with a prominent use of gongs and tuned percussion was that at one point the orchestra seemed transformed into a giant carillon of bells. The use of solo viola and cello played without vibrato suggested a consort of viols which was another thread working through the music. I thought this piece offered a fascinating new sound world but I am not sure I could connect it to its title – not at a single hearing anyway.

So far this was a great concert and yet everything to this point was eclipsed by what was to follow – the best performance I have yet heard of the *Symphony No.2 in D Major Op.43* by Sibelius; perhaps the best performance of any symphony by that composer. A dazzling clarity like what Nordic sunlight is supposed to be shone through this radiant, crystal clear performance. Every section of the orchestra stood out in astonishing three-dimensional relief. The melodies that adorned every movement, often seeming to struggle to be born, would suddenly burst forth in blazing glory especially where given to the marvellous brass section of the BBC orchestra. Even the tuba resounded with more life than I have heard before in this work. The genuine warmth of the applause at the end of the Symphony suggested that I was not alone in my opinion.

© Alan Cooper 2011