

ABERDEEN CHAMBER MUSIC CONCERTS

In association with:

THE SOUND FESTIVAL 2011

THE ELIAS QUARTET

THE COWDRAY HALL

Monday, 07 November 2011

Quartet No.3 Reed Stanzas by Sally Beamish was the new piece in Monday's concert given by the Elias Quartet. Sally Beamish is no stranger to the sound festival and last year on Sunday 31st October she spent a day working with over twenty local string players on one of her works. Some of these string players were in last night's audience to hear her new piece which was premièred by the Elias Quartet this year on July 25th in the Cadogan Hall, London as part of the BBC Proms Chamber Music Series. It was composed partly with Donald Grant, the second violinist of the Elias Quartet in mind. Donald is also well known in the world of Scottish fiddle music.

Although a Londoner by birth, like Sir Peter Maxwell Davies, Sally Beamish has a deep affection for Scotland and its various cultures and *Reed Stanzas* contains many references to different threads of Scottish music. Said by the composer to have been partly inspired by the *machair* on the Isle of Harris too, I thought I could detect something of that landscape subtly reflected in the music.

The work opens with a solo played by Donald Grant. He was supposed to enter from offstage playing as he came. Unfortunately, the stairwell to the stage of the Cowdray Hall is too narrow to allow for bowing so Donald had to begin playing onstage with the rest of the Quartet. This opening solo had something of the flavour of Piobaireachd in its gentle uncoiling and when the rest of the Quartet entered it was like a bagpipe drone but shifted up to a much higher register where it suggested wisps of mist drifting over the *machair*. Echoes of seabird cries, of Gaelic song and eventually of Scottish fiddle and dance music were all part of the amazingly rich tapestry woven into this wonderfully atmospheric piece. Sally Beamish has always had a flair for creating visions and aura with her music and this attractive work fitted that bill very nicely indeed in this authentic performance by the Elias Quartet.

The Elias opened the concert with Haydn's *Quartet in C Major Op.20 No.2*. Throughout the work, but especially in the opening movement, the first violin has a starring role. The excellent programme note drew our attention to the fact that the second movement can be thought of as an "operatic-scene- without-words" but this is very much true of the opening movement too where the first violin, Sara Bitloch is almost like a diva singing an ornate vocal line full of leaps and ornamental turns against a background provided by the other players. This afternoon, not having a recording of this work I went on the net and oh! Horrible, horrible, every one of the performances had a first violinist who never landed exactly square on the note after one of the leaps. No such problem with Sara Bitloch. Her performance was right on the nail and the result was a delightfully clear, clean and even lavish performance. The dark unison opening of the second movement led to a lovely cello solo and finally to a beautifully played "vocal" quartet from the four singing strings.

The minuet and particularly the trio were unusually pensive for the normally outgoing Haydn but the fugue in the final movement wound itself up excitingly and neatly into its faster, louder and thoroughly splendid conclusion.

This Haydn Quartet with its fugue finale was an excellent choice to set alongside the final work in the concert; Beethoven's celebrated *Quartet in Bb Op.130* with the *Grosse Fuge Op.133* at its conclusion. The Elias Quartet went for a performance of extreme contrasts both in speed and more so in dynamics. There was already a premonition of fugue to come in the contrast between quiet slow passages and flurries of excitement in the first movement. The Presto was certainly that. There was almost a sense of desperate urgency in the playing. The fourth movement with its infectious melody was delightful. Changes of pace in the Finale suggested an attempt on some great peak of music for which Beethoven had occasionally allowed his players to rest before the final great effort to get to the summit. Quiet playing was sometimes extreme, contrasting with amazing explosions of passionate counterpoint. In her introduction to the work, especially the finale, Sara Bitloch contrasted Haydn's considered intellectual approach with Beethoven's passionate consummation of all fugal writing in this piece and sure enough, no composer ever came anywhere near to approaching it again. Whatever else anyone might think; Monday's performance by the Elias Quartet achieved extreme limits of passion and excitement. I can only hope that somewhere in the aether, Beethoven himself could have **heard** their performance. He would surely have been astonished at his own brilliance.

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