

ABERDEEN UNIVERSITY MUSIC CONCERT SERIES 2018 – 2019
SPECTRUM NEW MUSIC ENSEMBLE

THE CARLAW/OGSTON COMPOSITION AWARD
KING'S COLLEGE CHAPEL
Thursday 28th February 2019

COMPOSERS:

JAMES ABURN
MURDO ROSS
GEORDIE CRYLE
ROSS CUMMING
ABIGAIL McLOUGHLIN

PERFORMERS:

JEREMY COLEMAN: Piano
CAROLINA LOPEZ DELNERO: Cello
WILLIAM GRAY: Piano
JAMES ABURN: Clarinet
BEN LIGHT: Clarinet
ROSS CUMMING: Baritone
DAVID WALSH: Tenor

One of the major highlights of the year for Aberdeen University Music is the annual **Carlaw/Ogston Composition Award**. This year's event was introduced by the current Head of Department, Dr Phillip Cooke with whom two of the contenders are currently studying composition. Others are being supervised by Professor Paul Mealor, Professor Pete Stollery and Professor Suk-Jun Kim. The competition was judged by John Casken, past professor and now Emeritus Professor of Music at The University of Manchester. He was unable to be in Aberdeen on Thursday because that evening, the Hallé Orchestra were performing his piece for trombone and orchestra, 'Madonna of Silence' in the Bridgewater Hall in Manchester.

Dr Phillip Cooke welcomed the large audience of young enthusiastic students as well as a few older but no less enthusiastic audience members to the event. Before each of the five performances, he chatted in a friendly manner to the composers about themselves and their new compositions.

First in line was James Aburn, a first class BMus graduate now studying for a master's degree in vocal music with Professor Paul Mealor. James has been very successful in getting commissions and performances of his choral music in Warsaw as well as in Britain. I know him also as a top rate clarinet player appearing often in the University Symphony Orchestra and the Marischal Chamber Orchestra. Tonight he was having to play clarinet in his own composition since the original player was unable to perform today.

Aburn's piece was entitled simply 'Three Pieces' but as the excellent programme note explained, it is in some ways just one piece because much of the harmonic and rhythmic material was common to all three sections. It opened with a series of long held notes in which the dynamic attack was made to waver slightly. This became one of the milestone markers throughout the piece. The piano played with incisive clarity by Jeremy Coleman often mirrored the clarinet. Variety in tempo, rhythmic attack and tonal qualities of the clarinet brought powerful introspective fascination to the music. There was, I thought, the merest hint of Boulez hovering somewhere in the background. Murdo Ross, a fourth year undergraduate student says that he draws influences from Debussy, Stravinsky and Bartók as well as folk and jazz. He is also a guitarist. His piece entitled 'Biome' was performed by cellist Carolina Lopez Delnero with, once again, Jeremy Coleman on piano. As Murdo explained before the performance, there was one very unusual element in the music. Normally, in a piece for cello and piano, the cello has the principal role supported by the piano but in Biome, the cello, often playing a simple pizzicato role and with a similar function even where bowing was used, was strongly overlaid by the piano part which was more lively and complex. The

cello, as the programme suggested provided a kind of heartbeat for the piano which had a quite glittering part to play.

Pianist William Gray was the star solo piano performer in Geordie Cryle's piece 'Abtei im Eichwald' (The Abbey in the Oakwood) inspired by a painting by Caspar David Friedrich. It is a rather dark and foreboding picture which was introduced to Geordie by Dr Eddie Campbell. Google it and see it on the net. Geordie's music exploited the full range of the keyboard from dark rumbling bass to high chiming upper sounds. This music had a definite impressionist feeling, a hint perhaps of Debussy and later on in the piece came a suggestion of Japanese or other oriental music. Baritone Ross Cumming was joined by tenor David Walsh in his piece, 'The Pilgrim Track'. This had fine clear singing, delivering the words with exceptional clarity. The two voices, sometimes blending or in unison or sometimes with jarring harmonies had just a suggestion of the medieval about them. A certain in an out rhythmic teasing was particularly impressive – well performed and very colourful. I particularly enjoyed this piece.

The final work in the competition was by the only female composer. Abigail McLoughlin's piece, 'It's Dark... It's Coming for Us... was hugely entertaining. Both the clarinettist Ben Light and pianist Jeremy Coleman were given several advanced performance techniques to create: noteless breathiness on the clarinet, plucked strings and bangs on the piano, although the central section of the piece was more traditional in approach.

After the performance, Dr Cooke invited Margaret Carlaw and Professor Ogston to come forward to present the prizes after he had announced the winner.

Would Professor Casken have chosen Abigail's piece because it had the most adventurous touches of advanced modernity? Would it be Ross Cumming because of its more immediate appeal? What about Geordie Cryle's atmospheric painting in music? There was Murdo Ross's unusual upturning of the solo cello and piano – most unusual surely. What about that? Then there was James Aburn's deeply introspective, thoughtful and cleanly written music? The concert arrangers knew the result in advance. I thought, oh well, it won't be James Aburn – simply because, as I told those sitting alongside me, "Oh, they never place the winning piece at the beginning of the concert". Well, I was totally wrong. The outright winner of the Carlaw/Ogston Composition Award was indeed James Aburn. He is certainly the most experienced composer. His particularly refined, well crafted music surely deserved to win. Congratulations James! We look forward to hearing your newly commissioned piece, an important part of the prize when it is performed in autumn this year.