

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN CONCERT SERIES 2018 – 2019
In association with the SOUND FESTIVAL 2018

DIANA BURRELL COMPOSER PORTRAIT
Presented by Dr PHILLIP COOKE

FEATURED PERFORMERS:

MATTHEW SCHELLHORN: Piano

THE UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN'S SAXOPHONE ENSEMBLE:
CONDUCTOR: RICHARD INGHAM

THE SPECTRUM CHOIR:
CONDUCTOR: KATHLEEN CRONIE

ALSO FEATURING:

ADEN MAZUR: Piano, MEGAN CHRISTIE & ERIN RALPH: Sopranos
ROSS CUMMING: Baritone
ANTHONY WHITE: Organ, SHANNON STEVENSON: Violin
CAROLINA LÓPEZ DEL-NERO: Cello

KING'S COLLEGE CHAPEL
Thursday 25th October, 2018

Largely because most people under 60 are at work mid-week, often at a considerable distance from the Citadel where the current Lunchbreak Concerts take place, the audience for those concerts tend, like me, to be getting on in years; but with the **sound** Festival working hard to promote contemporary music, getting young performers and a young audience involved is really important. Thursday evening's concert in collaboration with Aberdeen University Music was exactly what was wanted. Spectrum, the University's New Music Ensemble fielded their ten member Spectrum Choir conducted by Kathleen Cronie (this was the first time I had heard them) and also a first for me, was the University Saxophone Ensemble conducted by Richard Ingham. A number of other past and present students also took part as performers. In the audience were one or two older regulars and several staff members, but most important of all, a near capacity audience of young students filled the Chapel. I watched their faces. All of them were surely very interested, a few looked puzzled but I noticed one young man whose face was lit up with sheer delight at everything he saw and heard. For the **sound** Festival that is a triumph.

Today's special event was a Composer Portrait of Diana Burrell featuring six of her compositions, a remarkably varied selection which she introduced in conversation with Dr Phillip Cooke, currently the Head of Aberdeen University Music and himself, of course, a composer of note.

The first three works were song settings of very different sorts. '**Three Native American Blessings**' were settings of texts by Navajo, Cherokee and Choctaw Native Americans. The words were simple but also radiantly beautiful and I am sure unlikely ever to have been heard before in King's College Chapel. The performers were soprano Megan Christie whose clean, clear, high soprano voice suited the words nicely. She was accompanied on piano by Aden Mazur. The harmonies on the piano were

sprinkled with dissonances, at first surprising but not overdone and therefore very expressive. These adding extra shades of colour to the music, becoming in the end, quite delicious. Megan's voice soared beautifully over the piano.

The second vocal setting entitled '**Gaelic Blessing**' was sung by another soprano Erin Ralph. Her voice using a slightly lower register sounded beautifully smooth and creamy and she was accompanied on the Aubertin organ by Anthony White. The smoothness of Erin's voice matched the natural legato of the organ. She sang from the gallery beside the organ.

'**Tachograph**' was a very different kind of setting. It was performed by Ross Cumming who is renowned for the clarity of his diction. This text really needed that. Some of the words were spoken rather than sung. When Ross was singing, this was often unaccompanied and where pianist Aden Mazur came in, the piano part was quite spare opening up only when Aden had passages for piano solo. Diana Burrell had obviously thought out this setting very carefully. It worked well, the piano adding just enough colour, atmosphere and feeling without getting in the way of the words.

The next piece, a choral setting of '**Ave Verum Corpus**' was performed by the Spectrum Choir conducted by Kathleen Cronie. A really well balanced chorus, I thought they sounded great. The harmonies had just enough 'off centre' sounds to both surprise and delight.

Today was Diana Burrell's birthday. At the end of the concert Phillip Cooke got us to join in singing Happy Birthday and the **sound** Festival's director Fiona Robertson presented Diana with a very lavish looking chocolate cake. But this was Diana's seventieth birthday so where was the idea of youth in that? Well, at this point in the concert the University Saxophone Ensemble came on to play a piece entitled '**The Lynn Canal**' by fourth year music student Scott Bathgate, winner of the 2018 Carlaw-Ogston Composition Award. Scott is himself a saxophone player and this piece was very nicely shaped in the way it used the differently pitched saxophones. There were several attractive solos and I thought that rhythm was at the very heart of the piece. To begin with, sudden rhythmic jabs broke into the more smooth sounds. As the piece progressed, the rhythmic patterns were expanded and repeated at different pitches creating a feeling of revelation and consummation as the work drew to its close.

There were two more pieces from the pen of Diana Burrell to complete the concert. The first entitled '**Confession**' I found truly fascinating. It had three performers – Aden Mazur, not on piano, but rather working inside the piano. He performed finger glissandos over the strings holding down the sustained pedal and creating delicate clouds of bell-like sound above which violinist Shannon Stevenson and cellist Carolina López Del-Nero played plainchant-like melodies with the utmost delicacy. It was a wonderfully dreamy and gentle performance.

In huge contrast, virtuoso pianist Matthew Schellhorn came forward to perform '**Pentecost**' which I was hearing him do for the second time today. He played this very piece at the Lunchbreak Concert. It was interesting to hear certain differences in the sounds of the work created by the more soft toned piano and the different acoustic ambience of the Chapel. At a second hearing I found it even more fascinating. The three movements, the first clear toned and forceful in the way it sold the plainsong melody, the second softer textured and misted by use of the sustain pedal and the final movement fiery and exciting. The young audience seemed to really enjoy it. They gave Matthew Schellhorn a rousing ovation for an exciting conclusion to a concert that really got us to know so much more about composer Diana Burrell.