

ABERDEEN UNIVERSITY MUSIC CONCERT SERIES 2018 – 2019

GREATER LOVE

A Concert of Sacred Music Premières

Conducted by MARK SINGLETON

St MACHAR'S CATHEDRAL

Thursday 7th March, 2019

STATIONS of the CROSS

by KATHRYN ROSE

THE UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN CHAPEL CHOIR

CONRAD CHATTERTON: Baritone, Cantor

MATTHEW CLARK: Cello

JAMES ABURN: Piano

LISA JOHNSTON: Occasional Soprano Soloist

Stations of the Cross was the first of two new Sacred Works receiving their premières in St Machar's Cathedral on Thursday evening. When I was a student in the early to mid 1960s, the accepted convention was that tonality was dead and buried, never to rise again. Those composers who wrote tonal melodies or consonant harmonies were exiled to the worlds of film music or pop, neither of which were considered to be 'real music'. I am pleased to have survived to an age when all that is changing and contemporary composers are writing tonal music again, and doing it so brilliantly too. They are not just aping the music of past ages but are bringing originality, innovation and freshness to their new tonal compositions. Two such young composers are Kathryn Rose and Michael Merrill whose works astonished and delighted us today.

Both works had unusual forces but in every way they were very different. Stations of the Cross used the University of Aberdeen Chapel Choir whose nearly thirty voices conducted by Mark Singleton were sounding magnificent, impressive, sublime. The instrumental performances which bound the music so well together were pianist James Aburn and cellist Matthew Clark. The principal vocal soloist and Cantor, Conrad Chatterton, propelled the story, the events and the drama of the Stations of the Cross forward while delivering a powerful emotional punch through the warmth, confidence and authority of his singing. Along with James Aburn's colourful piano playing and the emotional narrative of Matthew Clark's cello voice, the biblical drama was brought powerfully to life.

Kathryn's work was in no way a copy of music of the past but it followed on from the traditions of a work like Bach's St Matthew Passion, in the way that it told the story of Christ's journey to the Cross while providing powerful emotional meditations on the events. Settings of poems by John Donne, George Herbert or Christina Rossetti along with biblical texts, Latin ecclesiastical celebrations like 'Ave verum corpus' and even a section in Scottish Gaelic were all bound together with a repeated intonation, 'We adore Thee, O Christ' shared between the Cantor and the chorus. There was an Easter Carol, 'Faithful cross, above all other,' with an attractive tune or a hymn at the conclusion of the work. I take these to be a carol or a hymn not from the texts but from the way in which Kathryn Rose has set them. Her work was almost filmic in the way in which it presented the drama. In several of the choral passages, soprano Lisa Johnston's lovely clear voice soared aloft

above the choir. How delightful was that? There was fascinating choral writing in some of the sections, 'From needing danger' by John Donne was like a scherzo and the rhythmic use of the basses in 'The Passion' by George Herbert was absolutely spellbinding. Above all, what I liked about this piece was the structural clarity that lay at the heart of the music as it led us on the journey that Kathryn had laid out so clearly before us.

THE MARTYRDOM of the SAINTS

by MICHAEL MERRILL

Libretto by Dr RAY ALSTON

THE UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN CHAPEL CHOIR

THE MARTYRDOM SINGERS (In the gallery at the rear of the Cathedral)

THE UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN STRINGS

THE PERCUSSION ENSEMBLE: PETER NEY, MURRAY BARTLE,

EUAN MacDONALD, ANNA MATHESON

ALEX WITHERS: Tenor, (THE PROPHET)

ROSS CUMMING: Baritone, (THE LORD)

PROFESSOR ANDREW MORRISON: Organ

PRE-RECORDED SPEAKERS:

BISHOP ANNE DYER, Dr RAY ALSTON, Dr RANDALL KEMPTON, Rev MARYLEE ANDERSON, MARGARET CARLAW, JORDAN NICHOLAS, RACHEL NICHOLAS, SAM CHIBA, BISHOP JOEL FERREIRA, HELEN MERRILL, PRESIDENT EMILY GOLDIE, MARC HALLACKER, Rev DAVID HUTCHINSON, MICHAEL MERRILL, Dr PHILLIP COOKE, Dr DAVID OLSEN AND PRESIDENT LEE McLEMAN

The Martyrdom of the Saints by Michael Merrill is an epic work, heroic even. Actually when all the performers are written down on paper they do not seem all that much, nothing like Mahler's Symphony of a Thousand for example but the way in which Merrill managed to marshal his forces made the work seem colossal in its impact. There were two choirs, the Chapel Choir lined up in front of us and in the Gallery, the 'Martyrdom Singers' a smaller ensemble who allowed the music to span the whole area of the Cathedral. The string group consisted of nine or ten players, basically pairs each of first and second violins, two violas, the programme said two cellos but I thought I saw three and there was a single double bass. However the sound they produced seemed very much larger. Really good players always manage that, don't they? The four percussionists were marvellous, able to make crashing sounds on bass drum, or gong for instance and there were many instances of the most delicate playing as with Peter Ney on glockenspiel.

Throughout the work Andrew Morrison's organ playing gave the music a marvellous fullness. The two solo singers were fantastic, Alex Withers a lovely clean clear tenor and Ross Cumming with his most authoritative singing as The Lord. Didn't he soar up to his highest notes with such magnificent ease and clarity. His solo, 'Fear not, for I have redeemed thee,' had a gorgeous gentle melody which Ross really put across beautifully to us.

The pre-recorded speakers moved the action of the work on apace. Their sheer variety, both male and female voices gave the work an extra spaciousness.

The choir section 'Be not thou therefore ashamed of the testimony of our Lord' began a capella then Peter Ney joined in with the glockenspiel and in the next section there was a lovely violin solo. What luscious music.

So much of Merrill's harmonic writing was like that. In the fifth section there were fantastic crescendi and then in 'The Days of Sorrow' some delicious pianissimo singing.

The fantastic colour, richness and drama of this music was amazing. The conclusion had real Hollywood lavishness, (am I allowed to say that?).

Thursday's performances of both pieces were absolutely magnificent. Every singer, every instrumentalist urged on by a fantastic conductor in Mark Singleton were on top of their form. My colleague at University music in the sixties, Iain Watson (he got a first), who was always trying to get good musicians together when in those days they were thin on the ground did not live to hear Thursday's performance. If he had, I think his head would have exploded. He could not have begun to imagine how brilliant Aberdeen University music has become. Lets hope that today's politicians who seem to be so keen to cut funding for music do not manage to spoil it all and take us back to the sparsity of the sixties.