

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN CONCERT SERIES 2018 – 2019

JILLIAN BAIN CHRISTIE: Soprano
BEN MARSDEN: Piano

KING'S COLLEGE CHAPEL
Thursday 31st January, 2019

Thursday's concert was to have been given by the vocal ensemble 'Juice', but owing to the illness of one member, this had to be cancelled. One of our best loved local sopranos Jillian Bain Christie stepped into the breach and with Dr Ben Marsden as her accompanist. They gave a particularly fine recital, glorious, not only for the exceptional performances of both musicians, but also for the fascinating selections of music they had chosen to perform.

Their programme was divided into five sections, beginning with three Scottish songs by fine contemporary Scottish composers. I remember being fascinated by 'Ca' the yowes' sung unaccompanied by Kathleen Ferrier on the radio in the 1950's. It was regularly requested. Today's more modern setting for voice and piano by Rory Boyle was made equally bewitching with Jillian's powerful soaring soprano floating above Ben Marsden's crisp brittle piano accompaniment. The relatively sparse piano was perfect for what is basically a folkish song, growing out of the countryside.

I first heard the next song, 'Ballad' by James MacMillan sung by Lisa Milne about two years ago. The piano part of this song is even more sparse but totally telling. There are few notes, but none is wasted. Jillian brought a transparent smoothness to the vocal part. It was delightful.

I heard Jillian sing Joe Stollery's setting of 'The Laird o' Cockpen' at the **SOUND** Festival recently but today's setting was by John Maxwell Geddes whose Scottish settings are rich and rare. Jillian, ably assisted by Ben, brought out the comedy aspect of this song to perfection.

The next section of the recital presented six songs by Scandinavian composers: three by the Finnish composer Sibelius, one by his Finnish pupil, Toivo Kuula and then the Swedish composer Hugo Alfvén possibly best known for one of his Swedish Rhapsodies.

All six songs were powerfully atmospheric, often rhapsodic, belonging to the late romantic style. The first of the Sibelius songs 'Demanten på Marssnön' (A Diamond on the March Snow) was sung by Jillian with beautiful floating top notes. 'Säf, säf, susa' (Reeds, reeds, whisper) had a rippling piano accompaniment with trills and it was very atmospheric around the story of a young girl who drowned in a lake having been tormented by others – a very up to date story these days.

Kuula's song 'Kesäyö kirkkomaalla' (Summer's Night in the Churchyard) was not unlike the music of Sibelius. The subject of the song reminded me of 'Au cimetière' by Berlioz from his 'Nuits d'été' but Kuula's graveyard comes across as a very different place, sad but generally more friendly.

I was particularly impressed by Alfvén's two songs. Lavishly romantic and with smooth flowing melodies sung with remarkable fluency by Jillian.

The two poems by Walter de la Mare in settings by the current Head of Music at the University, Phillip A. Cooke were particularly beautifully coloured. He has a real talent in painting with music. In the first song 'Winter' for instance the icy sounding piano part was splendidly graphic in its power. The more arpeggiated backing of 'Autumn' matched the sadness of the words in the poem. Back to the world of Scandinavian music we heard three songs by Grieg. Here again was lovely romantic vocal music with great atmospheric power. In the first, 'Med en Vandlilje' (With a Waterlily) it was as if folksong joined hands joyfully with art music. How splendid was that? 'En Svane' was powerfully pictorial and the last song in German 'Ein Traume' was marvellously colourful both in the piano and voice parts.

The final section in the programme contained three songs by Rachmaninoff. The romantic style of the Scandinavian songs had tonal colours that were generally softened or muted but with

Rachmaninoff all the shadings were gone and especially in the final song 'Don't Believe, My Friend' both Ben and Jillian really 'went for it' releasing their full powers as performers. It was magnificent.

The audience were loath to let Jillian and Ben go so they concluded by giving us a repeat of 'The Laird o' Cockpen'. It sent us all away feeling thoroughly well entertained!