

THE SOUND FESTIVAL 2018

JILLIAN BAIN CHRISTIE: Soprano

CATHERINE HERRIOT: Piano

SCOTT DICKINSON: Viola

St ANDREW'S CATHEDRAL, ABERDEEN

Saturday 3rd November, 2018

With so many other **sound** events on Saturday and several reviews to write, I was not sure I would manage to get to Saturday's early evening song recital by Jillian Bain Christie. I am so glad that I got there because it was one of the best ever such recital. This was not just because of the outstanding performances we got from all three musicians – Jillian Bain Christie, her piano accompanist Catherine Herriott and in the three songs by Phillip Cooke, viola player Scott Dickinson but also for the absolutely inspiring choice of songs, the first few old, all the others new. I remember being told at University in the early sixties, 'Tonal music is totally dead, everything in that area has already been done and done to death. If today's composers try to write that way, they will only be repeating what has been done many times before but nowhere near as good. Get your tone rows going boys!'

The many new songs we heard today proved that such ideas are complete nonsense. Here were eight composers, at least five of them very young, writing for voice and piano tonally and doing it in a way that was totally new and exciting.

Going back to earlier days however, here were the five songs from '**A Suite o' Bairnsangs**' by Thea Musgrave who celebrated her ninetieth birthday on 27th May this year. After the concert, Jillian told me that A Suite o' Bairnsangs was composed in 1953 when Thea was still 25 years old. They are settings of poems by Maurice Lindsay (1918 – 2009).

The vocal music set for high soprano is quite decorative, dare I call it curly- wurly, as if trying to tickle the ears of the listener. The piano part is simpler to let the vocal acrobatics come through. The songs were composed many years before Jillian was born but they could have been written expressly for her. Maurice Lindsay's words are wonderfully colourful and not without a special Scots sense of humour.

Judith Weir is known as an opera composer and not for the first time in this recital, here was a song that had that feeling about it. The piano part for '**Bessie Bell and Mary Gray**' was flowing representing perhaps the river near which the girls build their hideaway. The vocal part had a smooth narrative flow and Jillian was absolutely in control of it here.

Alison Willis studies composition at Aberdeen University. Her song '**O Tell Me Not, I Shall Forget**' dealt with slavery. The song was getting its Scottish Première. The piano part began with little chimes. Crisp and delicately brittle in its topmost register it supported Jillian's beautifully expressive singing perfectly.

Another very operatic song was '**Heaven Has No Rage**' (like love to hatred turned). By Gemma McGregor hearing her second composition at **sound** today. It deals with a woman who discovers that her man has been unfaithful to her. Jillian's dramatic performance touched on sadness, fury and revenge. It was a marvellous song and a wonderful performance with some quite amazing top notes. This was the World Première of this song.

The three songs that followed entitled '**Lakesongs**' were by Philip A. Cooke currently head of Music at Aberdeen University. These were enjoying their Scottish Première on Saturday. These songs did not only have a piano accompaniment, they also had a warmly attractive viola part. This really was my sort of music. '**A Lake Memory**' warm, lavish and colourful. I had thought '**The Lake Isle of Innisfree**' by W. B. Yeats too difficult to set to music. The words are a bit too matter of fact but Phillip Cooke had seized upon their basic simplicity and run with it, colouring them in lightly but beautifully with his music. The ending was deeply expressive however and the

performers made the best of that. **'By The Lake'** was a delicious picture in words and song, very atmospheric and colourful with which to conclude the trio of songs.

The piano part of **'Ah! Sunflower'** a setting of William Blake's poem by Sarah Rimkus was ripplingly attractive and Jillian sang it with delightful delicacy. This song too was a World Première. James Aburn's Summer Moonlight was having its Scottish Première. Its piano accompaniment had a spinning-wheel like quality. The melody and harmonies had a particular warm quality and Jillian's smooth singing reached so gently to the upper notes.

Paul Mealor's **'Shine Forth A Path of Stars'** was a couple of songs bound together. In the first section the piano part captured the sparkle of the stars while the Jacobite folksong in the second, with passages of unaccompanied voice had great emotional power. It was really moving in Jillian's fine performance.

As Jillian said at this point, most of her songs had been very serious so she was looking for a bit of fun to end with. She went to Joe Stollery who was up for it and ready to go. His setting of **'The Laird O' Cockpen'** with words by Lady Nairne and **'When She Cam' Ben She Bobbed'** were absolutely tremendous. They had a distinct Scottish flavour but not overdone and the music gave the stories a splendidly graphic filmic quality. This was precisely what the recital wanted. Joe Stollery's music was the cherry on the cake!