

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN CONCERT SERIES 2018 – 2019

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN CHORAL SOCIETY AND SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA, CONDUCTOR: CHRISTOPHER GRAY

MICHAEL MILLER: Electric Guitar Soloist

ROSS CUMMING: Baritone (Winner of the Chris Cadwur James Concerto Competition)

LIAM DYKER: Baritone

CAITLIN BELL: Soprano

ANTHONY WHITE: Organ

St MACHAR'S CATHEDRAL

Thursday 28th March, 2019

The music of Ralph Vaughan Williams had a real gala day in Aberdeen this Thursday. The weekly Lunchbreak Concert presented a very fine performance of 'On Wenlock Edge' with the Newhills Ensemble and tenor soloist Richard Coleman, then in the evening, at a concert by The University of Aberdeen Choral Society and Symphony Orchestra conducted by Christopher Gray, I heard one of the best ever performances of 'Songs of Travel' with Ross Cumming as baritone soloist. Then, there followed a truly awe-inspiring performance of the Cantata 'Dona Nobis Pacem' with full orchestra, organ and harp and two more sensational vocal soloists, soprano, Caitlin Bell and baritone Liam Dyker.

To open the University Concert however there was the World Première of a lavish new orchestral work by Scott Bathgate, winner of the Carlaw/Ogston Composition Prize in March 2018.

This work entitled 'Monochopsis' was quite filmic, perhaps even Hollywood in its impact. The variety of texture and instrumental colours flowing hard and fast from the orchestra had that film music quality about it. There was a special electric guitar solo part performed by Michael Miller. This was quite striking and at the end absolutely astonishing. Michael Miller even had sections where the electric guitar was played with a bow. I liked the smooth sweep of the string playing, the glowing horns and the rhythmic intensity of the percussion and even in one section, the cellos. What could there be to follow the sheer dramatic impact of Bathgate's music? Well, one of the finest performances I can remember of 'Songs of Travel' by Vaughan Williams for baritone soloist and orchestra. As the programme note informed us, Vaughan Williams himself had orchestrated only three of the nine songs: 'The Vagabond', 'The Roadside Fire' and 'Bright is the Ring of Words', these being the most popular of the songs. The orchestral versions of the others were by Roy Douglas, an assistant of the composer. I think he did a marvellous job. The entire piece flowed splendidly forward.

The orchestra played brilliantly, I was particularly impressed by the harp, but the undoubted star of the performance was Ross Cumming. Not only was the clarity of his diction second to none. Not a word was missed, but Ross drew out levels of meaning from the texts that made Robert Louis Stevenson's words sound like the best, most deeply felt poetry ever written which just on the printed page, it is not really. As I listened to Ross Cumming's lovely voice singing the words of 'Whither Must I Wander', I began to think there was something wrong with my eyes. What on earth was it? Goodness me! The performance was so affecting that I was beginning to cry. That has not happened to me for years. The only other piece of music that does this to me, I am ashamed to say

is 'You'll Never Walk Alone' at the end of 'Carousel'. It never fails, although when sung at football matches, it does not work.

We needed something even more exciting to follow that, and sure enough we got it with the next piece, the Cantata 'Dona Nobis Pacem'. Soprano Caitlin Bell was magnificent in her delivery of these words throughout the piece. What marvellously strong clear soprano singing. She soared easily above the most powerful orchestral textures, almost like a Wagnerian soprano. Christopher Gray did not have to hold back the orchestra for her one bit.

Baritone Liam Dyker has a baritone voice very different from Ross Cumming it had a special smooth warmth. At the end of the work when he sang the words of John Bright, 'The Angel of Death has been abroad throughout the land...' it was truly moving. Then later, Liam's singing was supported by a delicious choir of trombones – magnificent.

The organist Anthony White amalgamated his playing perfectly into the orchestral whole. With the pedals in particular, he enriched the orchestral blend so well.

The words from the choir did not always come through with perfect clarity but then with a piece like this, they never do. However, the sheer rich impact of the singing made up for that.

The percussion players in the 'Dirge for Two Veterans' were magical. The near whispering side drum was so emotionally powerful. The horns, the harp and so much else in the orchestral playing delivered the emotional impact of the music so well. All the people in the audience to whom I spoke said this was one of the best University concerts ever – so well done everybody!