

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN CONCERT SERIES 2016 – 2017
UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
JOHN FREDERICK HUDSON: Conductor and Concert Piano Soloist
St. ANDREW'S EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL
Saturday, 26 November 2016

It was something of a struggle for those working as ushers to get the huge audience seated for Saturday's concert in St. Andrew's Cathedral. This was a capacity audience and then some! They had been drawn to the Cathedral by what was a uniquely enticing programme. They were no doubt expecting something really special. They were not to be disappointed. I have been attending University of Aberdeen Symphony Orchestra concerts for over forty years. Saturday's was the very best ever - and that by a really long way. The standard was pretty much up there with many professional orchestras. First of all, this was a huge symphony orchestra playing some of the most colourful and exciting pieces in the repertoire. All three pieces in Saturday's programme demanded not only the best in ensemble playing but an abundance of demanding and essential instrumental solos. Under the masterful direction of John Frederick Hudson that is exactly what we got. He really is some machine! Aberdeen University Music is so fortunate to have someone so gifted working with them. The concert opened with Ravel's Boléro. I notice from the programme note that it was Ravel himself who described the piece as "... consisting wholly of orchestral texture without music – of one long, very gradual crescendo". Actually it is not at all "without music", most people are familiar with its wonderfully sinuous and dare I say quite sexy melodies. It begins with its rhythm beaten out almost subliminally on a solo snare drum. Ian Christie was spot on in his performance. He had to keep the rhythm perfectly regular, gradually getting louder throughout the whole piece finally being joined by a second snare drum, timpani, bass drum and other percussion. His performance was faultless. The first instrument to introduce the melodic content was a solo flute played with perfect clarity and steadiness by Chubbe Anucha. Clarinettist James Aburn soon took over, then other woodwinds. To begin with John Frederick Hudson directed with light nods of his head before the rest of the orchestra joined the dance. Light pizzicato strings added to the rhythmic pulse of the music later giving us the full symphonic sweep of the melodies. It was a hypnotically enticing performance. You can go on the net and see Leonard Bernstein's performance of Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue where he not only plays the solo piano but conducts the New York Philharmonic Orchestra too where possible. Well Bernstein is sadly no longer with us but we had John Frederick Hudson and the University of Aberdeen Symphony Orchestra. The work begins with a now famous swooping introduction on clarinet. This was played with real pizzazz by James Aburn. The rest of the orchestral accompaniments were spot on whether muted trumpet, woodwind, bluesy strings and little touches of percussive delight such as the glockenspiel. John Hudson's piano solo was both bluesy and rhapsodic, always very exciting. He, like Bernstein played entirely from memory and if there were some unexpected details it did not matter. I actually knew an amazing gentleman called Paul Peck who played in the first performances and he told me that Gershwin's own performances were never the same twice running. As the quotation goes, "now you has jazz". It was a thrilling performance.

After the interval Hudson conducted a splendidly clear-cut performance of Stravinsky's Firebird Suite. The strings were absolutely wonderful throughout this

work. They provided all the opulence, radiance and those whisperingly gentle effects that the programme note promised. I wondered whether I should have warned those next to me about the sudden bass drum explosion at the start of the “Infernal Dance”. But no! It was just so much fun to see them leap out of their seats. I’m sure Stravinsky would have been delighted too. This was a tremendous performance jam packed with instrumental colour. Congratulations to John Frederick Hudson and everyone, yes everyone, in his fabulous orchestra.