

## **UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN CONCERT SERIES 2018 – 2019**

### **UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN CHORAL SOCIETY**

**CHRISTOPHER GRAY: Conductor**

**LISA JOHNSTON: Soprano Soloist (Poulenc, Gloria)**

**GORDON COOPER: Piano -**

**(César Franck, Panis Angelicus & Fauré, Cantique de Jean Racine)**

**JOSEPH FLEETWOOD: Piano (Poulenc, Gloria)**

**St MACHAR'S CATHEDRAL, ABERDEEN**

**Thursday 8th November, 2018**

Some of the finest concerts I have ever attended have also been among the shortest. The best ever was a late night performance in Aberdeen Arts Centre in the 1960s of music from Kurt Weill's 'Happy End', conducted by the late Ian Kemp, at the time a senior lecturer in music at the University of Aberdeen and later a Professor at Leeds and then Manchester. The mezzo soprano soloist was Anne Brand. I can remember it as if it were yesterday. Last night's performance by Aberdeen University Choral Society of a programme of all French choral sacred music was almost exactly the same length – and I think I will remember it too.

It opened with a transcription by John Rutter of César Franck's Panis angelicus followed by Fauré's very attractive Cantique de Jean Racine. Both works are resolutely melodic and emotionally seductive. The Choral Society's performance conducted by Christopher Gray made the best of both. Gordon Cooper was the piano soloist in both works. His gentle clean playing with just a hint of harp-like sound went down particularly well in both. The tenors, though limited in number alongside the sopranos and altos, sang strongly in both works and the overall choral blend was most satisfying. I particularly enjoyed the flowing buoyant singing of the tenors at the opening of the Cantique de Jean Racine and the altos came in nicely along with them too.

The Poulenc Gloria is a far more challenging work and here the piano part was taken by Joseph Fleetwood. His experience as a concerto player probably helped him groom his performance in every detail to fit with the complex choral rhythms in the piece. The original intention had been to use an organist, but actually in the section of the work where the soprano soloist has her second Domine Deus along with Agnus Dei, I think the piano worked at least as well, if not better than the organ.

Lisa Johnston was the soprano soloist singing from aloft in the pulpit at the side of the choir. Her singing was wonderfully strong and clear but often with moments of fine delicacy in her delivery of the words and melodies. Her interaction with the chorus often with high upward leaps was really exciting. The chorus though not perhaps absolutely precise in some entries managed very well and offered admirably strong well-balanced singing to a memorable performance. It lived up splendidly to the quotation printed in the programme, "Poulenc's sense of humour and love of life shine through all his music. The Gloria brilliantly expresses these characteristics, with its captivating mixture of solemnity and mischievous exuberance". Thankyou for writing this part of my 'crit' for me. I could not have put it better.