

Musicians from The North East of Scotland Music School

Joseph Long – Piano Music of Chopin

Music In The University – King's College Chapel

Thursday 5th March 2015

Reviewed by Alan Cooper

Joseph Long opened his celebrity recital on Thursday with an illuminating performance of one of Chopin's most perplexing works, the Polonaise-Fantaisie in A flat Major. Now generally described as being in the composer's "last" style it has been looked at in so many different ways by pianists and critics over the years – not well accepted by many to begin with, it is now generally regarded as one of Chopin's finest creations. Mieczyslaw Tomaszewski in an essay on the work writes regarding Liszt's response to the music: "Liszt did a great deal of damage, since he was an acknowledged authority". Here is some of what Liszt wrote: "an elegiac tristesse punctuated by startled movements, melancholic smiles, unexpected jolts, pauses full of tremors..."

Joseph Long drew our attention to the many complexities of the work, its changes of key, its richness in theme and form. He gave us a few pointers to look out for. I have to say that for me Liszt's words were not all that far off the mark. Overall the piece combines the dreamlike melancholy of the Fantaisie, not too far removed from the idea of a Nocturne, and the rhythmic élan of the Polonaise, basically a dance form though it does not entirely dispel the contemplative mood that pervades the opening of the work. Even the rising motifs that run through the Fantaisie do not sound entirely optimistic. Joseph Long's performance was marked by his usual cleanliness and minute attention to detail. This was a fine thought provoking performance though the Chapel piano did not always quite match the brilliance of the pianist, especially in the most powerful passages.

Joseph continued his programme with something of a technical marathon – the Twelve Études Op. 25 played one after the other with hardly a pause between them. These pieces though designed to test and develop a series of different virtuoso techniques in piano playing, are so much more than just that. Many composers for piano have tried to give such studies artistic value over and above their technical purpose. Not all of them succeed in this but Chopin certainly did. He is possibly the most outstanding example of success in this respect. This is why so many of the studies have earned nicknames representing the colours or atmospheres that the pieces project to the listener.

The first study named "Aeolian Harp" (or sometimes "The Shepherd Boy") had a rippling left hand with above it a transparent melody line played so beautifully by Joseph. The second study has sometimes been called "The Bees" with rippling motifs in the upper reaches of the piano. The third study went lolloping along almost comically and I was not surprised to discover that it has been called "The Horseman".

Colourful rhythmic writing continued to dominate the playing in the next two studies before number 6 and 8 which Joseph explained were to test thirds and sixths. Number 9 called "The Butterfly" was absolutely magical and the name made perfect sense played with such entrancing colour and elfin lightness by Joseph. "The Winter Wind" – number 11, was suitably stormy and blustery while the final study with its arpeggios sweeping dramatically over the piano was well described by its nickname, "The Ocean". These rubrics were not suggested by Chopin himself and he did not compose the music with any such visions in mind but they can be useful in suggesting in a kind of shorthand way how the music is shaped and it makes it challenges our imaginations. These twelve studies were all so different and so tantalizing for the imaginative listener. The publishers of Chopin's day realised that such nicknames were a great way to get the public to buy the music. Still, we need to be careful how much weight we give to them. The gratifyingly large audience that attended the concert encouraged Joseph to give us an encore. He did, and it was one of Chopin's "greatest hits" his Mazurka Op.7 No. 1. It was absolutely magnificent.