

Musicians from The North East of Scotland Music School

The St Margaret's All Stars!

Janani Mohan, Niamh Dreelan, Gracie Spencer,
Olivia Douglas, Jenna Stewart and Eilidh Bisset;
with Emily Smith and Alesha Cowling

Lunchbreak Concert
Cowdray Hall, Aberdeen
Thursday 27th February 2020

Reviewed by Alan Cooper

Pupils of St Margaret's School for Girls have, over the years, established themselves as popular regulars at the Lunchbreak Concert Series, so of course today's performance drew a near capacity audience to the Cowdray Hall. I was expecting great things and I was not to be disappointed. I have given all the performers star billing at the head of today's review because that is exactly what they were, 'The St. Margaret's All Stars'.

The first to perform was pianist Janani Mohan with a marvellously fluent and expressive performance of 'Arabesque No. 1' by Debussy. Janani's free-flowing arpeggios following the rhythmic pulse of the music, her variations in dynamics and tempi, created just the right expressiveness and dare I say the pictorial qualities that Debussy himself would have hoped for.

Alesha Cowling's lovely pure natural soprano voice was perfect for her performance of the American folk-song 'The Water is Wide' in an arrangement by Mark Hayes. She delivered all the required feelings of the song over her whole performance. It was actually quite moving aided by the beautifully delicate piano accompaniment by Peter Parfitt. Delivery of the words was essential for the success of this song and Alesha was up there with the best.

As Roger Williams said in his opening remarks, the Lunchbreak Series is renowned for the breadth of musical genres to which it gives a warm welcome. Thus the next performer was a first rate Scots Fiddle performer, Niamh Dreelan with piano vamp supplied so nicely by teacher Susan Brown. Niamh opened with the Hornpipe 'Roxburgh Castle' before moving on with two Polkas. I noticed feet and hands in the audience starting to tap along, so Niamh was obviously working her special magic.

Again the breadth of musical appeal was delivered in the next piece which was the song 'Let Me Be Your Star' from the popular television series 'Smash' with music by Marc Shaiman. Again the words were very important and whoever taught Gracie Spencer and Olivia Douglas must know their business because I did not miss a word. The developing dynamics of the piece culminating in the two girls singing together worked spectacularly well.

Jenna Stewart's performance of the First Movement of Schubert's 'Sonatine' for violin and piano benefited greatly from Jenna's warm rich violin tone and once again, here was a performance that developed properly in dynamic power.

'Ach, ich fühl's, es ist verschwunden' is Pamina's despairing aria from Mozart's opera 'The Magic Flute'. I discover that in the very first performance of the opera, the role of Pamina was sung by seventeen year old Anna Gottlieb. Today's singer from St Margaret's, Eilidh Bisset, is the same age but her voice had the dynamic power and clarity of a mature operatic soprano. Wonderfully expressive across a huge vocal range with rich low passages and easy soaring top notes, Eilidh is definitely going somewhere in the opera world. Remember, as Roger Williams often says, 'We heard her here first'. In a few years we may not be able to afford her.

The final performer was Emily Smith, the second pianist in the concert. She gave an exciting account of 'Rhapsody No. 2 in g minor Op. 79 No. 2' by Brahms. This was another powerfully expressive performance. In every one of today's performances, the girls did not just play or sing the notes, they played or sang the music. There is an important difference and Emily's performance was proof of that. No wonder that Roger Williams came back onstage at the end to thank these fabulous young musicians. They were certainly worth it!