

Musicians from The North East of Scotland Music School

Celebrity Piano Recital: Murray McLachlan

With Interval Performance: Aberdeen Youth String Ensemble

The Sanctuary, Queen's Cross Church, Aberdeen

Friday 13th June 2014

Reviewed by Alan Cooper

I can scarcely believe that eight years have passed since Murray McLachlan gave a solo piano recital in Aberdeen. I remember his splendid performances of the complete cycle of Beethoven Piano Sonatas in the Elphinstone Hall for Aberdeen University Music. As well as being Head of Keyboard at Chetham's School of Music and Senior Tutor at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester, since 2009, Murray has been Vice President of NESMS and so it is our local North East School that we have to thank for inviting Murray to come and perform in a special celebrity concert in support of the School.

I was particularly delighted to discover how far Murray has developed and grown in pianistic artistry over the past eight years. This was evident at once as I listened to the emotional depth and understanding which his performance of Beethoven's Sonata in E Major op. 109 managed to draw from the score. I felt he had got right to the heart of Beethoven's spirit here.

The first half of Murray's recital was a tribute to a programme given many years ago by the late John Ogden. It began with J. S. Bach's Prelude and Fugue in c sharp minor from Book I Das Wohltemperirte Klavier. Like Ogden, Murray McLachlan chose to imbue Bach's music with a feeling of quite romantic expressiveness. Bach's music is universal in its appeal whether played as pure early music or even as jazz so such an approach worked well, especially as Murray managed to bring out every contrapuntal entry with startling clarity. There was pensiveness about the prelude and expressiveness in the fugue which worked largely because the cleanliness and clarity of the performance was pure Bach.

A real eye-opener however was the Beethoven Sonata. In his introductory words before the performance, Murray said that this was very much a transcendental work and that is exactly what we got from much of the playing. Even though there were moments of forcefulness and excitement in the opening movement the overall effect was of marvellous serenity coming from the shaping of melody and harmony that Murray achieved in his playing. This was a wonderfully luminous performance. The central Prestissimo though opening with the desired ferocity had an overall gentleness to it as well.

The third and final movement as long as the other two put together is a series of variations and the resulting variety of tempi, touch and textures developed in so many individual ways ensured that Beethoven and Murray never ceased to surprise and delight us.

The third piece in the first half was one of the most exciting and dazzling works in the entire repertoire: Liszt's Dante Symphony. Murray took us on a whirlwind journey down into Dante's

Hell and back again. I cannot remember a more amazing demonstration of pianistic brilliance. The piano achieved far more than even the biggest orchestra could have done in conjuring up the visions of Dante's Inferno. It is a wonder that the piano itself managed to survive. It was certainly driven to the edge of its capabilities. Absolutely marvellous!

During the interval we were most royally entertained by the nine members of the Aberdeen Youth String Ensemble. I assure you that I am not exaggerating when I say that they were just great. They reminded me of the Scottish Ensemble as soon as they started to play the Prelude from Grieg's Holberg Suite. Of Glorious Plumage, a glossy piece by the contemporary Californian composer Richard Meyer, featured luscious string solos from the leader of the ensemble and this was followed by a humorous recasting of Mozart's Eine Kleine Nachtmusik entitled McMozart's Eine Kleine Bricht Nicht Musik in which a succession of well known Scottish melodies found their way into Mozart's original. The piece was the work of Edward Bor (1921-2013) writing under the name of Prof Teddy Bor.

Murray McLachlan opened the second half of his recital with a wonderfully light and delicate performance of Chopin's Berceuse op. 57. It was as if the right hand painted a musical picture of thistledown floating weightlessly on a warm and gentle summer breeze.

Ronald Stevenson's Eight Scottish Songs after poems by Robert Burns, Hugh MacDiarmid and Francis George Scott deserve to be much better known. These are fine virtuoso piano pieces each with its own richly developed character. There was the dark near menace of Wha is that at my bower door, the piquancy of Wee Willie Gray or the humorous violence of Crowdiknowe and so much more. The audience gave Murray a splendid ovation and he responded with an amazing encore for just the left hand: Scriabin's Nocturne for left hand alone – worth coming to the concert just to both see and hear that being played so beautifully!