

Musicians from The North East of Scotland Music School

Joseph Long – Talk and Piano Recital

Lunchbreak Concert
Aberdeen Salvation Army Citadel
Thursday 28th April 2016

Reviewed by Alan Cooper

Along with the Edinburgh Quartet we must surely rank Joseph Long as one of our finest and most popular regular contributors to the Lunchbreak Concert Series. A large audience turned out not only to hear his performance of two of Mozart's finest and possibly most perplexing piano works, but Joseph's excellent pre-concert talk was well attended too.

Thursday's recital featured two works by Mozart which are often but, as Joseph explained, not always linked together in performance. These were the Fantasy K. 475 and the Sonata K. 457 both in the key of c minor. In his talk, Joseph picked out many points of interest illustrating them beautifully with the piano excerpts which he played slightly faster than in actual performance in order to cover the material in the time allowed for the talk.

Various comments culled from University theses or lectures on the internet would seem to give further credence to the idea that Mozart probably did intend these works to go together. Joseph drew our attention to several unusual features of the Fantasy that makes it stand out uniquely among all other piano compositions by Mozart. The sequence of keys does not follow the usual pattern expected of a composer of the classical period. The fact that Mozart scored the music as though it were in C Major with chromatic alterations, sharps or flats added simply where they were required, suggests strongly that he was clearly aware that what he was writing was unusual and he meant it that way.

This piece has provided musicologists with an ideal stomping ground, writing about whether the piece is any way linked with sonata form, whether Neapolitans are involved or Lydian modes and so on. What Fun! Joseph sensibly avoided such arcane matters and concentrated on what we should expect to hear in a live performance. He even composed his own continuation from the opening of the Fantasy that Mozart could well have written if he had wanted to follow a more conventional classical format. This showed Joseph's deep understanding of Mozart's repertoire. His continuation was, I thought, remarkably believable. In his discussion of the Sonata, Joseph picked on a couple of sections which could have inspired Beethoven. The section which sounded very like the opening of the Second Movement of the Pathétique Sonata was particularly convincing – more about that later.

After the portentous introduction of the Fantasy, Joseph gave a sensitive, gently paced performance of what were quite lyrical passages of music. The Fantasy alternates slow plaintive music with faster dramatic even angry passages. Joseph captured the contrasts of pace and intensity in Mozart's writing most convincingly. The return to the opening music near

the end of the piece was accomplished most tellingly. It was like finally returning home after a musical journey filled with astonishing surprises.

The Sonata was composed before the Fantasy and from the opening we could discern the connection between the two works. The opening movement was, as Joseph had promised in his talk, dramatic, energetic and fast paced. It has been suggested that this is a work that mirrors tragic events in the composer's life. I am not sure about that but in the development section the way that the thematic motifs were flung at us across different keys did suggest anger – or perhaps despair?

It was in the slow movement that the theme similar to the one that opens the slow movement of the Pathétique Sonata appears. This was indeed a lyrical movement but Joseph's playing displayed admirable strength as well and I loved the way he made this theme sing out so beautifully in the left hand underneath right hand embellishments using other thematic material within the movement.

The finale was every bit as energetic as the first movement. Joseph gave us playing that was crisp, fresh and incisive. I loved the way Mozart, in Joseph's interpretation, prepared and brought off the conclusion of this movement. Composer and pianist took us all along with them.

After an enthusiastic reception from the large audience, Joseph just had to give us an encore and as he often does, he had something unusual at his fingertips. This was a joke piece that Mozart had written for one of his pupils, a young lady who did not like doing exercises in counterpoint, it was entitled Funeral March for Masterful Mr Counterpoint K 453a – and of course the joke is that it contains absolutely no counterpoint whatsoever.