

FRIENDS OF
THE NORTH EAST OF SCOTLAND MUSIC SCHOOL
SCHOLARSHIP CONCERT 2016

AMY BIRSE: Piano Scholar
KATHLEEN CRONIE: Soprano, Assistant Administrator for NESMS
ANNA MORRISON: Tom Johnston Piano Scholar
RACHEL GROVES: David Nicholson Flute Scholar
RICHARD BAILEY: Accompanist

CRAIGIEBUCKLER PARISH CHURCH
Friday, 24 June 2016

Reviewed by Alan Cooper

Derek Buchan has had a long association with NESMS both as a piano student of Professor Nigel Clayton and as a member of the Council of Management and the Fundraising Committee. Representing the Friends of NESMS, he introduced what turned out to be one of their best ever Scholarship Concerts.

It took off in fine style with a flamboyant performance from Amy Birse, NESMS Piano Scholar, 2016. Her selection of music began with the Prelude and Clair de lune from Debussy's Suite Bergamasque. The Prelude was powerfully expressive. Carefully nuanced rubato and variations in dynamics shone through in this carefully considered vision of Debussy's music. Clair de lune was clean, clear and gently seductive. Debussy's music is often highly pictorial and in Amy's playing the vision of a lovely moonlit landscape shone through with a gentle translucent glow.

Amy's piano technique stressing fluency yet with minute momentary delays in tempo, more than just rubato, were carried through into Rachmaninov's Prelude in g sharp minor Op 32 no 12. The decorative right hand was perfectly well balanced against a warmly delicious left hand melody.

Amy's final piece was Paderewski's colourful dance-like Minuet 1887. Again rubato was important here, reminiscent at times of a Viennese waltz. Little touches of light-hearted wit in Paderewski's writing came through brilliantly in Amy's playing.

The next performer was to have been Oboe Scholar Christopher Smith. Unfortunately he was unwell so his place was taken by soprano Kathleen Cronie, the current Assistant Administrator for NESMS. However, she turned out to be absolutely fabulous in every detail of both singing and stagecraft. This was a polished fully professional performance. It began with Zerlina's aria, Batti Batti o bel Masetto from Mozart's opera Don Giovanni. Kathleen offered us a delightful coquettish tease in this aria. It was not just her singing, but her body movements too, her eyes and at the conclusion one raised eyebrow brought her whole performance to life. It was as if we were actually in the theatre at the opera. Kathleen's porcelain-clear soprano voice was superb here and in her next piece, Solveig's Song by Grieg. Her voice sounded strong yet perfectly relaxed right across her range but particularly in her free-soaring top register. Best of all though was her stunning performance of the mechanical doll

Olympia's aria from *The Tales of Hoffman* by Offenbach. Kathleen turned herself convincingly into the mechanical doll with her jerky movements and a need to be rewound from time to time. This winding was echoed amusingly in Richard Bailey's colourful piano accompaniment. Brilliant in her vocal technique and wonderfully amusing in her mechanical movements this was one of the dazzling highlights of the entire evening.

The second pianist in Friday's programme was Anna Morrison, The Tom Johnston Piano Scholar. Quite different from Amy Birse yet equally brilliant, Anna began with the first of the *Three Intermezzi Op 117* by Brahms. Anna's playing showed muscular strength as she brought out the rich Brahmsian chords and melodies in the piece. Her playing had both warmth and tenderness in a thoughtful and well breathed realisation of this music.

Anna's playing also showed strength allied to technical fireworks in Khachaturian's *Toccata*. It was an exciting and spellbinding piano experience. She showed herself capable of tender playing too while spinning forth the rich melody in Liszt's famous *Liebestraum no 3*.

Rounding off Friday's concert was Rachel Groves, The David Nicholson Flute Scholar 2016.

The final movement of J. S. Bach's *Flute Sonata in b minor BWV 1013, Presto*, was superbly well phrased with just the right forward impetus yet not forgetting steadily paced rhythmic playing – an absolute necessity for the works of Bach.. Well controlled breathing and expert tonguing in faster passages were proof of Rachel's technical expertise.

In the first movement of Poulenc's *Flute Sonata*, Rachel's playing had a delightful fluency with an elfin lightness that had her almost dancing along to the music. Her body movements however were in no way superfluous – they fed directly into her sound on the flute making it dance too.

Rachel's final piece was even more dance-like, full of syncopating excitement mirrored in Richard Bailey's fantastic piano accompaniment. This was the *Ostinato*, the second movement of John Rutter's *Suite Antique* for flute and piano – a happy conclusion for this star quality concert.

After votes of thanks, Derek Buchan presented Gráinne Cullen with a generous cheque from the Friends which will go towards supporting teaching costs for pupils at the school. Donations are always welcome and the quality of the performances we heard at this year's Scholarship Concert proves them to be paying rich artistic dividends too.