

NORTH EAST OF SCOTLAND MUSIC SCHOOL PRESENTS

A PIANO RECITAL BY MURRAY McLACHLAN

The Sanctuary, Queen's Cross Church, Aberdeen
Saturday 18th February, 2023 at 3pm.

PROGRAMME:

Chopin (1810 – 1849)

24 Preludes Op. 28

McLachlan (b. 1965) Dundee

Homage à Godowsky

Chopin

Ballade No.4 in f minor

Ronald Stevenson (1928 – 2015)

Fugue on a Fragment of Chopin

Encore:

Stevenson per Francis George Scott (1880 – 1958)

Aye Waukin O. (Song by Robert Burns 1790)

It was nothing short of exhilarating to find Murray McLachlan back in Aberdeen to give us another glorious virtuoso piano recital. Among the audience in Queen's Cross Church were many musicians, some of whom I had not seen for some considerable time – quite a few of them were piano teachers, and one, to whom I spoke, is a superb violinist who now works in Basel, Switzerland. There were a large number of very young people too, many of them enthusiastic piano students at various levels. They were in for a real treat. Saturday's concert could have been entitled, 'Come and meet Chopin with Murray McLachlan', because all of the pieces in the programme were either by Chopin himself or had close connections with him via other composers or arrangers. One of these was Murray McLachlan himself. A fascinating list of famous names were involved in Saturday's programme one way or another. Chopin himself, of course, Leopold Godowsky (1870 – 1938) a Lithuanian born American concert pianist and Ronald Stevenson, a first rate Scottish pianist and composer. J. S. Bach was very much present in the piece by Stevenson and of course as the original inspirer of Chopin's Preludes. There was also the less well known but excellent Scottish composer Francis George Scott, and alongside him in the encore, Robert Burns. I think Burns would have been astonished to find himself there in the 21st century among the others.

The recital opened with Chopin's '24 Preludes, Op. 28'. I was familiar with so many of these Preludes but as far as I can remember, this was the first time I had heard a live performance of them all together. One can never be sure of such matters, but I read that Chopin himself had never played more than four of them together in one concert. There are early complete recordings by Ferruccio Busoni and Alfred Cortot and the earliest complete performance could have been by Anna Yesipova in 1876, if Wikipedia is to be believed.

Probably the best overall description, one that can hardly be dismissed, is by whoever described all the pieces together as ‘a roller-coaster of emotions’. Murray McLachlan’s more than brilliant performance certainly lived up to that. Chopin composed the work when he was with the French novelist George Sand (Amantine Lucile Aurore Dupin de Francueil) in Mallorca. Chopin had gone there for health reasons having been recently diagnosed with pulmonary tuberculosis which was eventually to kill him. Apparently the weather would be fine and sunny for some days, then cold and wet. Did that have an effect on the different moods of some of the individual pieces? The second piece, following the C major opening of the work, is in a minor. Bülow described it as ‘*Presentiment of Death*’. Did anyone else pick up on the fragments of the Dies Irae in this piece?

There are so many varied moods in the complete work, Idyllic, Elegaic, Cantabile, Scherzoid, Cantabile (song-like), Hymn-like and Nocturne have all been mentioned regarding several of the pieces. Murray’s performance gave us all of these and more. In many of the pieces sometimes lighter, sometimes angrier, his fingers flew ferociously, yet masterfully across the keyboard. Even if I were not playing any notes at all, I could not have moved my arms from one end of the keyboard to the other with such amazing dexterity. It was fascinating to watch not just his hands but his foot on the pedals as well. Oh! So the ‘loud pedal’, as I call it, when I try to play, is not there just for somewhere to rest your foot while playing!

There were a great number of the Preludes which were familiar as single pieces from performances by many pianists in the past who have used them as encores, but Murray’s performance took us right into the troubled mind of the composer from brighter to darker moods and above all, he confirmed the Preludes as one of the greatest piano works ever, both technically and emotionally.

Murray McLachlan’s own ‘Homage à Godowsky’ a Chopin Nocturne recast for left hand alone was a tour de force of pianistic grandstanding – absolutely amazing. One hand, and the left at that, able to do what many professional pianists can hardly manage with both hands. I will never forget this performance.

Chopin’s ‘Ballade No. 4 in f minor’ opens pensively and builds to dazzling complexity and piano fireworks. Above all Murray’s performance brought out the depth of feeling with which the composer has charged this wonderful piece.

I met Ronald Stevenson several times because we were both friends of Charlie King a real enthusiast for Stevenson’s music. Stevenson’s ‘Fugue on a Fragment of Chopin’ was surely one of his finest and most exciting pieces. It contained the music of Chopin but J. S. Bach was surely in there too. Stevenson was a talented pianist and as the piece progressed that was evident as well. I am glad that Murray continues to champion the music of Stevenson. Pieces like this certainly deserve to be heard more regularly.

Is it necessary for me to say that Murray’s performance earned an enthusiastic ovation from Saturday’s audience. Well, that is exactly what he got, and so well deserved it was too. He rewarded us with an encore that brought together Robert Burns, the original writer or collector of the song, a piano version by Francis George Scott which you can access on the internet and an arrangement by Ronald Stevenson, performed brilliantly by Murray McLachlan. A splendid conclusion to a formidably brilliant recital. Thank you Murray and of course Colin at NESMS!

ALAN COOPER