

Musicians from The North East of Scotland Music School

The Auld Alliance

Music from France and Scotland

Lisa Milne, Soprano
Harry Williamson, Piano

Lunchbreak Concert
Aberdeen Salvation Army Citadel
Thursday 19th January 2017

Reviewed by Alan Cooper

Today's recital of songs by French and Scottish composers brought together Aberdeen's own international singing sensation Lisa Milne with pianist Harry Williamson. It proved a delicious feast of incomparable artistry and refinement from both performers. Lisa was on top form. She is one of those rare artistes who can convince everyone in the audience that she is singing just for them. Her warmth, passion, yes and humour too, lit up the entire hall - and with the delicacy and refinement of his playing, Harry Williamson mirrored Lisa's matchless mastery of all today's songs to perfection.

They opened their programme with four songs by Reynaldo Hahn. Hahn was born in Venezuela of German Jewish extraction but he became a naturalised French citizen and is regarded as a French composer writing in the French *mélodie* tradition. The texts of the opening songs *Si mes vers avaient des ailes* and *Offrande* are by Victor Hugo and Paul Verlaine. The first had a soaring soprano line with an unusual harmonic ending while the second had a delicate expressiveness that matched the more delicate spirit of Verlaine's poetry. Lisa and Harry excelled in delivering every sensation in both songs. The third and fourth songs are settings of words by much earlier poets. *À Chloris* was a poem by the baroque poet Théophile de Viau and here Hahn matches the text by writing in a baroque pastiche style that came through especially in the delicately played piano part. There was also a hint of earlier style in *Quand je fus pris au pavilion* with a text by Charles, Duc d'Orléans, and here Lisa brought out the colour and brightness of the music written to match the pictures of candle's flame, the brightness of a spark or the flight of a bird summoned up by the text. Lisa's special intimate relationship with this music brought it vibrantly to life. She got right to the heart of the music.

The texts of both the songs by Fauré are by Paul Verlaine. *En sourdine* had a clean-soaring soprano line and in *Mandoline* the piano underlined the brightness of the singing beautifully. All these French songs had a detailed expressiveness and often delicacy. What sort of songs by Scottish composers had Lisa chosen that could match these.

She began with two songs by the contemporary Scots composer James MacMillan. The first entitled simply *Ballad* was extraordinary. The word setting had a delicious purity and the piano part was amazingly sparse yet powerfully expressive. In both songs the voice and piano were

treated more as equals with regard to their expressive power. Though in Ballad, the piano has relatively few notes, not one of them goes to waste. This was a work of real genius. The second piece simply entitled Scots Song was deeply moving and I loved the way the piano blossomed along with the voice at the end.

Lisa told us that she thought that the Scots composer Francis George Scott born in 1880 in Hawick does not get the attention he deserves. I am inclined to agree with her. I actually have a volume of his songs selected and edited by another fine Scottish singer, tenor Neil Mackay. Neil is famed for the perfect clarity of his diction and this is something that also marks Lisa's singing.

Scott's setting of the Robert Burns song Aye waukin' o uses a tune different from the one many people may be used to but it was still very attractive and Lisa brought out the full range of emotions contained in the song in her full colour performance. The lightsome humour of The Wren's Nest was brought to life almost like a cartoon film in song and Lisa plumbed all the emotional depths of O wha ma babie cloots will buy.

The final song has words by Hugh Macdiarmid and should read: The Teuch Sauchs in the Reuch Heuch Hauch. What on earth could that mean. Well, Neil Mackay's edition supplies a useful glossary so I can tell you that the title in English is "The tough willows in the rough low-lying ground by a river". I have to confess that the Scots, once you know what it means, is more poetically effective. Lisa really went to town with the words and music in this song. She got a huge ovation to which she responded with an unaccompanied performance of Auld Lang Syne to the original tune that Burns himself had used. It was a delightful conclusion to one of this season's best ever performances – and this year, that is really saying something!