

Musicians from The North East of Scotland Music School

# Kay Ritchie, Colin Brockie, Roger Williams

Lunchbreak Concert  
Aberdeen Art Gallery  
Thursday 20<sup>th</sup> November 2014

Reviewed by Alan Cooper

Every year in the Lunchbreak Concert Series, one or two special events take place, not in the Cowdray Hall, but in Aberdeen Art Gallery. Several Saturday performances which were part of the SOUND Festival were in the large 20th Century Upstairs Gallery. Drum's Aisle in St Nicholas Church has been used for early music but today's concert is one which I always look forward to with particular anticipation. The Portrait Gallery at the rear of the Victorian Gallery is currently the home of the small chamber organ and it is always a delight to hear its voice brought so convincingly back to life by Dr Roger Williams. Better still when star flautist Kay Ritchie is with him to take part in their wonderfully revealing performances of Handel Flute Sonatas – two particularly fine examples today. Oboist Cheryl Bell was to be there as well but being unable to appear she was replaced for this concert by bass baritone Colin Brockie who also chose to perform music by Handel. There was one very special surprise in the programme – but more on that later.

The Portrait Gallery is an ideal venue for Handel's music. It is so well suited to this repertoire having I suppose a similar acoustic to that found in a large aristocratic town mansion or country house. It looks great too.

Roger Williams assisted by Kay Ritchie gave a very helpful introductory talk centring on the two Handel Sonatas the Duo were about to perform. It certainly opened my eyes (and ears) to some of the fascinating detail that Handel has woven into his music. Roger and Kay demonstrated that in the opening Larghetto of the Sonata in a minor HWV 362 Handel has bound together flute playing that was reminiscent of one of his operatic arias while the delightful organ accompaniment has elements of both the Siciliana and the Passacaglia. The Duo also demonstrated two interpretations of the meaning of the word Adagio one at almost half the speed of the other. The result was two totally different musical colourings. The talk made me realise how much thought and work Roger and Kay always put into the preparation of their performances. Playing music well requires so much more than just an accurate reading of the notes. Is this why the Duo make Handel's music sound so good?

In the opening movement of the a minor Sonata, the organ has a very delicate, almost minimal input, both in the sense of volume with Roger choosing a very gentle stop and in the fact that the flute has several unaccompanied passages in the movement. Kay Ritchie's playing really did sing out making Roger's suggestion of an operatic aria come boldly to life.

More stops were needed for the second movement with the organ busily living up to the indication, Allegro. Kay's playing here was superbly lithe and bright. She gave the Adagio a gentle caressing beauty while the organ was played with admirable subtlety. The Finale was a superb blend of minor mood with Handel in contrastingly happy and jaunty spirits.

The other Handel piece for flute and organ continuo which closed the concert was his Sonata in F Major. Its opening movement, Grave, had a certain ecclesiastical nobility about it especially in the organ writing. It was followed by an Allegro which could have been another operatic aria but would have needed a particularly virtuosic soprano to tackle it. Fortunately we had Kay Ritchie and her flute. The Siciliana had a marvellous seductive sway to it though it was rather short and then the Finale was fast, happy and playful.

Colin Brockie's contribution to the concert was a performance of the recitative and aria from Messiah – For behold, darkness shall cover the earth – and – The people that walked in darkness. Colin's singing was wonderfully rich and warm, well balanced over his whole range. His diction was superb and he captured the import of the words very well indeed.

I mentioned earlier that there was a surprise item in the concert. The programme note tells us that Debussy's piece for unaccompanied flute, Syrinx, was incidental music, intended to be played behind a curtain. Kay Ritchie took it one step further. The Gallery of the Memorial Gallery with its broad ranging echos is accessible through a side door at the back of the Picture Gallery. Kay Ritchie played Syrinx from there leaving the door open so that we could profit from just enough of the echo effect to give the music a certain Attic mystery. It was absolutely entrancing but some people who had come late and were in the Victorian Gallery said they could not really hear it properly. Never mind, they told me they had thoroughly enjoyed the rest of the concert.