

Musicians from The North East of Scotland Music School

Joseph Long, Piano

Claude Debussy

Lunchbreak Concert
Aberdeen Salvation Army Citadel
Thursday 18th October 2018

Reviewed by Alan Cooper

Thursday saw the return to the Lunchbreak Series of one of its most regular and popular performers, concert pianist Joseph Long. I was not at all surprised that there was a full house for this performance and it turned out to be right up there with his best ever. As I left the concert, I noticed that 'Roger's Boxes' were well filled with banknotes, so I reckon that Thursday's audience must have agreed with me.

The programme, and I include the well deserved encore, was made up entirely of the piano music of Claude Debussy (1862-1918). Not only did Joseph give a matchless performance of the six (or seven, including the encore) pieces in his programme, at 12 noon he gave what was surely one of the best ever pre-concert talks in the entire series. He picked out the most important compositional formulae that Debussy had used in composing each of the pieces and by means of demonstrations of each of these on the piano, brought them vibrantly to life and made them so easy to understand. I watched the faces of many in the audience light up as Joseph spoke and played. He began with Deux Arabesques, explaining what an 'Arabesque' is and playing an excerpt from an earlier example of the form, namely Schumann's Arabesque op. 18. Joseph explained that these relatively early works could have been called just Intermezzi and he demonstrated the difference between the more well-known and beautifully flowing No. 1 in E and the rather more 'spiky' No. 2 in G. He played sections of the central parts of the works as well.

Moving on to Estampes and Pagodes, Joseph explained the influence that the 'slendro' scale used by Javanese gamelan players had on Debussy. Unlike the Western scale, the Javanese scale can be divided into five equal parts. Joseph demonstrated how Debussy was able so cleverly to give an impression of being able to reproduce something of that effect on the modern concert piano.

In La Soirée dans Grenade, Joseph told us that Debussy had spent only about half a day in Spain but by means of rhythm and the suggestion of strummed guitar chords on the piano he was able to capture the very essence of Spanish music.

In Jardins sous la pluie, Joseph played two French children's musical rhymes which Debussy had incorporated into this music and for me, it suddenly became clearer than ever.

As for L'Isle joyeuse, Joseph referred us to the painting by Antoine Watteau 'L'Embarquement pour Cythère' and its spirit of 'Fêtes galantes' which comes through so strongly in this music

although he wondered whether a visit to the Island of Jersey may also have influenced Debussy explaining why the word for Island is spelled 'Isle' as in English and not with the French spelling île.

If I have spent a fair bit discussing the details that Joseph brought out in his talk. This is because it was just so good and so helpful.

What about the performances themselves? Well all of the music by Debussy that we heard today requires a special fluency, lightness and fleetness of touch, something for which Joseph Long is renowned. Play the music too heavily or too slowly and it just isn't Debussy. Play too lightly and there is a danger of skipping over or even missing notes. Joseph's playing was just perfect. There are passages in L'Isle Joyeuse where the hands are on top of one another. There is a danger of clouding the music but with Joseph, in these passages the lines of music remained perfectly well defined. His playing throughout was a perfect expression of cleanliness and clarity.

The First Arabesque flowed beautifully while the gentler passages in the Second (there are stronger ones too) were like a pure spring water bubbling out of the ground.

With Pagodes, Joseph took us all the way to Java and its gamelan music sounding through the night while in La Soirée dans Grenade we could imagine the whirl of the Spanish dancers' colourful skirts. In Jardins sous la pluie there was the rain and possibly, with the children's songs, the face of a little boy looking out into the garden when it was too wet to go out and play.

Best of all was Joseph's bright and clear performance of L'Isle joyeuse. He got a thunderous ovation from today's audience and responded with Reflets dans L'Eau from Images. There was no falling away from the standard of the rest of the concert in this encore, in fact, dare I say that this was the best. The idea of reflections on a lake of dark water was brought graphically to life which is what Debussy wanted. Sorry Stravinsky, but some music can express so much more than just itself.