

Musicians from The North East of Scotland Music School

## Joseph Long, Piano

Balakirev

Lunchbreak Concert  
Aberdeen Salvation Army Citadel  
Thursday 12<sup>th</sup> April 2018

Reviewed by Alan Cooper

Pianist Joseph Long is a popular regular at the Lunchbreak Concerts and as usual his appearance on Thursday drew a capacity crowd to the Citadel. I had gone expecting to hear a performance of Beethoven's Pathétique Sonata along with a selection of the Bagatelles so it was something of a surprise that instead, we were to hear a performance of a much less well-known work, the Sonata Op. 102 in b flat minor by Balakirev. A surprise, yes, but what turned out to be a very pleasant surprise indeed made even more appealing and revelatory by Joseph's excellent introductory talk. He spoke at first about Balakirev's life and musical development, much of it self taught, although he did study for a short time with Mikhail Glinka, a period of study cut short by Glinka's early death. He was born in Nizhnii Novgorod, the only other well known citizen of that town being Maxim Gorki. He had great influence over another whole group of composers christened 'The Mighty Handful' by the critic Stasov. They included several more famous names including Moussorgsky, Borodin, Rimsky-Korsakov and César Cui. As Joseph told us, most of these very talented composers had careers other than in music, Moussorgsky had a post in the Military, Rimsky-Korsakov was an officer in the Imperial Russian Navy, César Cui was an Engineer-General in the Russian Army and my great inspiration, Borodin, was a medical doctor, a chemist and a hospital administrator and for much of his life he did not feel very well. When I wake up on a Thursday, feeling a bit off colour and thinking, 'Perhaps I'll give the Lunchbreak Concert a miss today', a voice inside my head says, 'Remember Borodin and all the things he was able to do! Get out of bed and get moving!'

Joseph told us that it was Balakirev who was the motive force behind the Mighty Handful, often being very helpful and encouraging to them. Unfortunately, he tended to be very opinionated trying to force his opinions on music on all the others to the extent that eventually they broke off relationships with him. He also founded a 'Free Music School' to encourage musical education among the young. He disliked the two Conservatoires, one in Moscow, the other in St. Petersburg founded by the Rubinstein Brothers, Anton and Nicolai because they were 'too Germanic and not Russian enough'.

What a marvellously rich background on Balakirev Joseph had painted for us. He went on to discuss the four movements of the Sonata which he was going to play for us. The first with its fugal opening, perhaps a reference to J. S. Bach followed by music reminiscent perhaps of Chopin. The second movement is a Mazurka with its emphasis on the second and sometimes even on the third beat of the bar which Joseph demonstrated with exemplary clarity. The third movement, an Intermezzo, would be softer and more romantic or even impressionistic while

the Finale would have a strong Russian folk theme but then in the middle, a surprising hark back to the third movement and then an ending that used the phrygian mode, neither major nor minor and therefore mysterious and asking for much thought. Joseph said that this Sonata is Balakirev's finest work for piano and I certainly found it both fascinating and delightful to watch and hear.

Joseph opened the first movement with a fine clear statement of the theme which was to become the basis of the fugal opening. It would recur regularly throughout the movement. If the idea of fugue was a harking back to Bach, the theme itself had a decidedly Russian flavour. In Joseph's performance, its regular recurrence amid the more 'Chopin-like' passages often with wonderful glassy ornamentation on the upper piano provided both contrast and a musical marriage that Joseph handled very beautifully creating a quite new idea of thematic clashing, development and coming together that makes Balakirev's idea of structure in the movement something both new and possibly unique.

The Mazurka began with rousing chords as if to say to the dancers, 'Come on, get off your seats and get ready for the dance'. Joseph played the dance with amazing aplomb, the stresses on second or third beat and the momentary almost-pauses giving the music a special lift. The powerful chords returned as if to tell the band and the dancers that this music was reaching its end.

The Intermezzo had passages of delightful transparency set against powerful left hand statements.

The main theme of the finale was fully Russian and there was a hint of a sort of variation in the movement, the theme changing its mood becoming at one point quite jolly and elsewhere almost fierce or at least strongly emphatic. It was in this movement that pianistic virtuosity shone through with Joseph giving right hand decoration a special fleetness to the rapidity of his fingering. The hark back to the music of the third movement was a delightful surprise and as Joseph had promised the ending was full of challenging mystery. Joseph had proved that this was indeed a marvellous sonata. The audience seemed to agree and a tsunami of applause brought forth another piano piece by Balakirev, a delightful if simpler piece entitled Fisherman's Song.