

NESMS 40TH Anniversary Piano Festival

A Programme of Piano Duets with Nigel Clayton and Francesca Leonardi

Craig Centre For The Performing Arts, Robert Gordon's College
Aberdeen

Sunday 20th September 2015

Reviewed by Alan Cooper

The Piano Festival hosted by NESMS offered three major celebrity recitals over the weekend comprising Saturday 19th and Sunday 20th September. I am delighted to report that all three were very well attended. The three concerts explored the role of the piano in several different guises. On Saturday Nigel Clayton was joined by violinist Gina McCormack in an exploration of the piano as a member of a chamber ensemble. On Sunday afternoon Joseph Long used the piano as a solo instrument in jazz while on Sunday evening, Nigel Clayton was back, this time as a piano duet partner with the magnificent Italian pianist Francesca Leonardi.

Sadly, piano duet concerts are a rarity these days. I cannot remember the last time I had the opportunity to attend one. As Nigel Clayton said, there was a time when piano duets (one piano, four hands) were a major part of musical entertainment for many families especially in the Victorian era. It was the advent of broadcast or recorded music that almost wiped out the piano duet. I am of an era when recorded music did not sound very good but the advent of the hi-fi and the LP record changed all that. Since then, the CD and now the computer download has put the final nail in the coffin of the piano duet as being the only way the listener could access great music. Duet versions and in some cases piano solo reductions of great symphonies are still available but few people buy them. However we should not forget that the piano duet in itself is a valid art form with many fine works composed initially in that format although solo versions often followed. This was the repertoire that made up Nigel and Francesca's programme on Sunday. We must thank them for reminding us of the sheer enjoyment that these splendid "salon" pieces can give us today though I am not sure that in normal Victorian families the music sounded anything like as fantastic as it did today.

Francesca was a pupil of Nigel's at the Royal College of Music in London but now I think he would regard her as an equal and they often appear together as recital duettists. In everything they played today the perfection of their ensemble work was manifest. In their opening piece, Franz Schubert's Fantasy in f minor Op. 103 the two parts primo played by Francesca and secundo played by Nigel were clearly defined but they also slotted together faultlessly. This was the most serious piece in the programme music aimed at real artists of the piano rather than amateurs I suspect. I particularly enjoyed the restless excitement of the fugue and in this work even the silences were so artistically delivered.

The rest of the programme could be considered as "salon" pieces although Donizetti's Larghetto was something of a discovery by the duo. It was a truly delightful work.

The five Hungarian Dances by Brahms were familiar, sometimes from orchestral versions. Francesca and Nigel projected the dance rhythms with joyous vehemence. They made the music ring out so that it became something of a struggle to resist the temptation to get up and join in the dance.

Weber's Invitation to the Dance likewise lived up to its title in the duo's irresistible performance.

Rachmaninov's Italian Polka was short but joyful with attractive and seductive melodic content. Finally, to finish the programme the duo opened up their pianistic toyshop with all twelve of Bizet's short and wonderfully graphic pieces from his *Jeux d'Enfants*. In the programme, the titles were all in French. Some like *La Toupie*, the spinning top, are pretty obvious. You could surely have guessed what it was from the music. Others are more difficult: *L'Escarpolette* is the Swing, *Le Volant*, the Shuttlecock, *Les Bulles de Savon* you could probably guess are Soap Bubbles and *Saute-Mouton* we would call Leapfrog. Others are more difficult: *Colin-Maillard* is Blind Man's Buff and *Les Quatre Coins* in English is Puss in the Corner. I had to look that one up even in English – it sounds terribly complicated. Still, this was an absolutely entrancing performance. I particularly liked *Les Chevaux de Bois*, the galloping hobby horses – all there in the music – or the splendid *Trompette et tambour* – no translation needed. Finally the elegance of *Petit Mari*, *Petite Femme* was followed by *Le Bal* with Nigel and Francesca taking us all the way into a child's colourful imaginings of a grand dance reception, like Cinderella's Ball perhaps?

Even before the Bizet, Nigel promised us an encore. We would certainly have asked for one anyway. It was another short but absolutely delightful piece, a Waltz by the Hungarian born composer Mátyás Seiber who became a British citizen and taught composition in London. One of his pupils was Barry Gray who wrote the music for *Captain Scarlet* and *Thunderbirds are Go!* Something for the pub quiz enthusiasts perhaps?

Can I finish by complimenting Robert Gordon's College on their marvellous new concert venue, The Craig Centre for the Performing Arts? It seems to have absolutely everything you could possibly want for a chamber concert. I hope to be back there soon.