

FRIENDS OF THE NORTH EAST OF SCOTLAND MUSIC SCHOOL
A RECITAL OF SOLO CELLO MUSIC BY NESMS TUTOR JAMES HALSEY

St. Mary's Cathedral, Huntly Street, Aberdeen. Tuesday 26th April 2022 at 7:30 pm.

Hans Werner Henze (1926 – 2012) Serenade for solo cello (1949) **J. S. Bach (1685 – 1750)** Suite No.5 in c minor for solo cello BWV1011

Aulis Sallinen (b. 1935) Elegie for Sebastian Knight Op.10 (1964) **J. S. Bach** Suite No.3 in C Major for solo cello BWV1009.

The first concert presented by the Friends of NESMS for some time was introduced by Kathleen Haw who standing in for Dr Roger Williams who is unwell, welcomed a gratifyingly large audience to St. Mary's Cathedral for Tuesday evening's celebrity solo cello recital by one of the school's finest long standing tutors James Halsey. He started by saying that when he was a student many years ago, his tutor had stressed the importance of organising your programme properly, suggesting that the opening piece should be easily digestible by the audience. He went on to say that he was going to ignore that advice completely by beginning his recital with the 'Serenade for solo cello' by Hans Werner Henze. He explained that Henze was a composer who employed 12 tone serial techniques, something that might put off some audience members. He need not have worried. He explained that this piece with its nine (extremely short) movements was actually very well constructed with each movement having strong easily understood characters well defined by their titles. Titles like Vivace, Tango, Allegro marciale and Menuett delivered exactly what their labels suggested. The opening movement, Adagio rubato did indeed present all twelve notes in order but the result was remarkably tuneful, rather beautiful in fact as played by James Halsey. The pizzicato playing of the second movement Poco Allegretto was marvellously well delivered. Although the individual movements were remarkably short, they were packed full of fascinating musical detail. For those who are interested, the internet offers not only a performance but the printed scores to go along with it. This was in fact a marvellous piece to open the concert and I loved it.

J. S. Bach's Suite No.5 in c minor was described by James Halsey as being shot through with a certain sadness and despite much rapid complexity, that was certainly detectable. The opening Prelude begins with a slow emotionally charged section followed by a rapid fugal styled section. It was here that I was drawn to watching James Halsey's rapid and detailed fingerboard work. It was almost as if his fingers were playing a keyboard. It sounded wonderful and it looked great too. The following Allemande was thoughtful, a little sad perhaps but very elegantly performed. The Courante was athletically played followed by a pensive Sarabande and then the two part Gavotte with Halsey differentiating the parts exceptionally well. Finally there was the Gigue in which you could imagine the dancers kicking their legs up, possibly?

After the interval at which refreshments were served we were treated to another short but fascinating modern work. This was Aulis Sallinen's 'Elegie for Sebastian Knight' based on a fictional character in a novel by Vladimir Nabokov. The music began very softly but grew in both strength and full cello colour. At times, the solo cello sounded almost like a full orchestra. It ended with pizzicato and with the cello strings being strummed like a guitar.

The official programme of this marvellous recital ended with another solo cello suite by J. S. Bach. This was Suite No.3 in C Major. Its much shorter Prelude was quite scalar in form and here James Halsey made his instrument really sing out. The Allemande of the third Suite was very different. It was faster and really quite jolly. Once again I was able to enjoy the keyboard-like fingerwork spanning the fingerboard which was also an important feature of the following Courante. The Sarabande, though slow, had a smiling warmth to it, followed by two happy sounding Bourées and finally the amazing Gigue which suggested folk song in its melodic writing and seemed very much a joyful open air piece.

James Halsey had earned himself thunderous applause and smiling faces to which he responded with a special encore. It was Gordon Jacob's Ecosaise, the fourth movement of his Cello Serenade. I note it is marked Presto con brio and James Halsey certainly gave it all of that and then some – a brilliant showpiece with which to conclude a fabulous recital.

Kathleen Haw ended by thanking the Cathedral for giving us such a warm welcome. They, she said, are the neighbours of NESMS and they could not ask for better neighbours.

ALAN COOPER