

Musicians from The North East of Scotland Music School

Student Concert — Music From Around The World

Host and Presenter: Rev Kenneth Petrie

Craigiebuckler Church, Aberdeen

Sunday 25th March, 2018

Reviewed by Alan Cooper

The first of six pianists to perform in Sunday's special fundraising concert in support of the North East of Scotland Music School was Oisín Lyons. He played 'La Chapelle de Guillaume Tell' from *Les Années de Pèlerinage* by Franz Liszt and all from memory — quite an achievement in itself. It does not use themes from the opera by Rossini, but having been performed in Paris, Liszt could possibly have known it — or was he inspired instead by Schiller's play or just by the Swiss legend itself?

It begins with a series of huge portentous chords and in fact the entire piece is powerfully dramatic — full of those huge chords, trills and dangerous leaps. None of these seemed to provide any difficulties for Oisín in his brilliant curtain raiser for today's concert. Composed around 1855, but possibly using earlier material, it dates back to many years before the advent of cinema but its graphic colours and dramatic outpourings are certainly very cinematic. I wonder if any of the early cinema pianists ever used it in their performances? I don't know, but like Oisín, they would have had to be exceptional pianists.

The second performer was a soprano, Catherine Gellatly. As in several other of today's performances, she was accompanied on piano by Harry Williamson. He is a fabulous accompanist, like a reincarnation of the late celebrated Bobby Howie.

Catherine sang two well-known English songs, 'June', by Roger Quilter and 'If There Were Dreams To Sell' by John Ireland. Catherine has a crisp delicate soprano voice. In these English songs, delivery of the words is paramount to achieving success. I am pleased to report that Catherine was exceptional in this. I did not miss a single word. The texts themselves, along with the performance, conjured up wonderful pictures as we listened.

The next pianist was a girl, Alex Riddell. She chose to play a very challenging piece by another great pianist composer, the Prelude Op. 23 no. 5 by Rachmaninoff. There are three crucial levels of music in this piece demanding to be given equal prominence: a delicate upper melody, a rippling accompaniment and a lower melody which sometimes becomes part of a gently rocking background. Alex delivered each one of these beautifully, bringing them all perfectly together in a remarkably refined performance.

Harry Williamson was back as accompanist for another soprano, Hazel Wilkins, who chose Puccini's 'O Mio Babbino Caro' from Gianni Schicci, the comic finale of Puccini's three one act operas often performed together and known as *Il Trittico*. There is a fine aria in the middle opera *Suor Angelica* but 'O Mio Babbino Caro' could be called "the one big hit from the show". Hazel gave us a fine performance marked by excellent high notes and I am sure the audience really enjoyed this number.

The next pianist was young Lynette Thomas who gave a thoughtful performance of Chopin's Nocturne in c sharp minor. I particularly enjoyed the delicacy and fluency of her playing.

With the recorder, or to give it its Sunday name Blockflöte, its place as a beginners school instrument tends to spoil its reputation, but in the hands of a true instrumental virtuoso, it is up there with the best of instruments. Ruaraidh Wishart is one such virtuoso performer. He was accompanied by Harry Williamson in an absolutely rip-roaring performance of a great showpiece, 'La Danse' from Three Matisse Impressions by Edward Gregson. There are two Matisse paintings of that name and you can access them on the internet. They sum up the whirl and excitement that Ruaraidh gave us with his performance. He used two different recorders and the finale on soprano with whirling torrents of notes brought a splendid conclusion to the first half of the concert.

There is not a huge repertoire for solo double bass but one of the finest composers for the instrument is Giovanni Bottesini. Scott Matheson chose one of his gentler more melodic pieces in which the double bass becomes like a lovely genial baritone singer. Instead of just woofing away with its pals at the far side of the orchestra, the bass enjoys the limelight in this piece. For his performance of Bottesini's well-named *Rêverie*, Scott was joined by another fine accompanist Jeremy Coleman — more of him later on.

One of Scott's fellow pupils is cellist Ruaraidh Williams. Scott acted as his piano accompanist in two superb cello masterpieces, a smooth toned performance of Fauré's *Après un Rêve* and then a fiery performance of William Squire's *Tarantella*. Like the recorder piece, but maybe just a little less fast, more torrents of notes, with amazingly intricate fingerboard work were played with admirable precision by Ruaraidh.

Will Kathleen Christie forgive me if I say that she represents the more mature pupils of the School? What distinguishes NESMS from some of the other music establishments in the city is that, unlike the Dyce School for instance, it gives opportunities to older musicians who, after a lifetime of work when time is limited, wish to go back and study music as they may have wished to have done in their youth.

Kathleen is keen on opera and she decided to choose Bizet's *Seguidilla* from *Carmen*, the Aria from Act One with which *Carmen* successfully seduces Don José. Catherine gave it a twirl of a performance with real pizzazz. As she said in her introduction, the first performances of the opera were not successful. It is even suggested that members of the orchestra sabotaged it, but possibly they were just not very good. I hope that if there is an afterlife, Bizet is looking down and rejoicing in the fact that *Carmen* is the most performed opera in the repertoire.

We were nearing the end of the concert. The last three performers were all pianists. Adam Auchie has come a long way as a pianist. I remember him in one of the jazz concerts but today he played another of Liszt's pieces, *Sonetto 123 del Petrarca*. He captured all the heart and soul of this music in a magnificent performance. It was atmospheric, broad and expansive, and fully expressive with a real mature understanding of the place of rubato in Liszt's music.

The final work in the programme was a one piano four hands arrangement by August Horn of Wagner's Prelude to Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg. The two performers were Dr Imogene Newland and Dr Jeremy Coleman. Yes, they both have doctorates in music and they do not just give these away for nothing. Imogene also impressed in the past with her own compositions and she was one of the stars of the jazz concert in the Blue Lamp. Like Harry Williamson, Jeremy is a top flight accompanist. I expected their performance to be spectacularly good — and so of course it was! Need I say more? Of course not!

Here we were at the end of our journey across the world in music led by our genial host the Rev. Kenneth Petrie who has also studied voice at NESMS. Since the NESMS colour printer had failed, the flags of the nations represented in the programme were all in black and white — well, grey actually. Perhaps NESMS missed an opportunity here. There could have been an opportunity for a competition — guess the country! Fun With Flags as my namesake Sheldon says in The Big Bang Theory!