

Musicians from The North East of Scotland Music School

The Bear and The Piano – Teddy Bear Concert

Roger Williams, Margaret Preston,
Margaret Hearne and Gillian Jack

Lunchbreak Concert
Aberdeen Salvation Army Citadel
Thursday 7th April 2018

Reviewed by Alan Cooper

Just over a year ago on Saturday 7th January 2017, the Lunchbreak Concert Series hosted a special Family Concert whose theme was Teddy Bears. It was inspired by an illustrated children's book by David Litchfield entitled *The Bear and the Piano*. This book (published by Frances Lincoln) won the prize for the Best Illustrated Book in the Waterstone's Children's Book Prize in 2016. The concert was a resounding success. The Citadel was packed with families who had brought along hosts of very young children to the event with their own teddy bears in tow. The organisers decided to repeat the concert this year and once again the Hall was packed. The sounds of eager young voices filled the air with anticipation. The line-up of performers was almost the same as before although, this year, soprano Pandy Arthur is unwell and her place was taken by Gillian Jack.

I am almost afraid to mention that inside a very happy and friendly-looking teddy-bear costume was the Lunchbreak Series Artistic Adviser and pianist extraordinaire Dr Roger B. Williams. This is because last year one very small boy was adamant in an argument with his mum that it most definitely was a real bear and it really did play the piano - "I saw it, I saw it!" I do not want to disappoint him or any other young children. Congratulations are due to Roger for his acting ability and his body language making 'The Bear' look very real and very friendly and welcoming to all the young audience members. After the concert too, Roger kept on his costume so that many of the young children could have their pictures taken with him.

Margaret Hearne (The Story Teller) too was marvellous with the children. She brought many of them up front to take part in the fun with all the teddy-bears that filled the front of the Citadel. There was one really big teddy there too, I quite fancied taking it home with me.

Margaret Preston (flute: *The Bird*) had designed and made her own costume. In glorious full colour, it was splendid. As I said last year, it would not have been out of place in a performance of *The Magic Flute*.

Gillian Jack (soprano: *The Singer*) with her bright eyes and open expression also captured the imaginations of the children when she opened the performance by running through the words and the tune of *The Teddy Bears' Picnic* with music by John Walter Bratton (1865-1947) and words by Jimmy Kennedy. It is great that a song I remember from my childhood radio days is being kept alive today.

The performance proper began when The Bird, Margaret Preston, led The Bear, Roger Williams, to the piano. His costume is not designed to be vision friendly for the wearer. For last year's performance, Roger had composed a special Fugue based on the melody of the Teddy Bears' Picnic. Both he and Margaret Preston played it at the start and finish of the story told by Margaret Hearne.

The story of The Bear and the Piano describes how a little bear cub comes across 'a strange thing' in the woods where he lives. He discovers how the 'thing' makes noises, originally not very nice but he goes back day after day and gradually the noises become nicer and nicer and finally he discovers that the 'thing' is called a piano. He keeps practising until he becomes very proficient and he becomes a famous concert pianist. Having become internationally rich and famous, he longs to go back to the forest and see his friends. Originally they are not there but finally he finds them and they have all arranged a great welcome for him. There the story ends and we all joined enthusiastically with Gillian Jack in singing The Teddy Bears' Picnic. Everybody, adults and children, had enjoyed a wonderful time. Nobody really wanted to go home and many of the young children lined up with The Bear after the concert to have their photographs taken with him.

The concert was a great opportunity to introduce the youngsters to famous classical pieces. These were most often played in special arrangements for flute and piano with the flute often taking the well-known tunes and the piano providing a deliciously rich backing. In all, there were twelve classical pieces from all across the repertoire starting with Fauré's Sicilienne and ending with Richard Rogers's Waltz from Carousel. Vivaldi, Tchaikovsky, Beethoven, Chopin, Souza, Debussy, Smetana and George Gershwin were all generously represented. Most adults would have recognised these pieces, especially regular concert goers, but it was interesting that during the story and the music, the many small children remained quiet and attentive. One of the great things that the Lunchbreak series manages to do so well is in providing performance opportunities for young musicians but of course without an audience, performance is a bit pointless, so The Bear and his friends are doing a great job in breaking in young audiences to concert-going at a young age and making sure that music stays alive. I think that is more important than anyone realises. Are you listening you politicians, not just in Aberdeen, but nationwide these days? It really is so very important!