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Review Details:

SAM HAYWOOD: Sonatas and Salon Pieces

Alan Cooper

16 November 2006

Picture Gallery, Mitchell Hall, Marischal College

Sam Haywood, surely one of the most electrifying pianists ever to galvanize an Aberdeen audience gave a breathtakingly brilliant celebrity recital on Thursday as part of the current collaboration between Aberdeen University Music and the Sound Festival. The music of contemporary Scottish composer John McLeod featured prominently in the programme and it was the piano music of Chopin that Sam Haywood chose to complement the modern pieces. At first glance, this could have seemed a puzzling choice but by the end of the performance, the dazzling unbridled energy and virtuoso technical demands made by the music of both composers meshed together perfectly and the two talents joined hands comfortably across the century and more that separates them.

The thunderous opening of Chopin's Piano Sonata No 2 Op 35 was astonishing. Of symphonic proportion, it led to the more serene second subject, but not for long, in the development, the pianistic fires burned as strongly as ever. The Scherzo and Trio showed the expressive range of Sam Haywood's playing something that he carried over into the Funeral March and its contrasting major section. The finale, one of the most bizarre ever written, the rustle of dry leaves blown across a dark landscape, flowed magically from Haywood's fingers.

John McLeod's Three Piano Interludes (1997) transcribed from his film music for *Another Time, Another Place* were followed by his Hebridean Dances (1981) also originally composed for orchestra. Sam Haywood's wonderfully expressive playing made both groups stand out as totally original piano compositions. He drew amazing atmospheric power and a living sense of place from the Three Piano Interludes while the traditional Scottish tunes of the Hebridean Dances were dressed up in the most wonderfully virile and joyful piano clothing.

John McLeod's Piano Sonata No 4 opened the second half of the concert. Here his writing for the piano really took flight easily matching the whirlwind technical brilliance of the Chopin Sonata with Bartok-like stabbing chords and frenzied runs that Sam Haywood drove forward at full tilt. The more relaxed central movement had a certain opalescent glow about it before the fires flared up more brightly than ever in the Finale.

There was so much going on in this music that it seemed to be over before one could draw breath. No chance of ever being bored by this music.

It was back to Chopin for the rest of the performance, but a more gentle side of the composer. The Scherzo No 2 Op 31 had plenty of sparkle and gentler still, a beautifully seductive performance of the Andante Spianato. Finally it was back to the technical fireworks again, though of a less ferocious variety with the Grande Polonaise Op 22.

Great music in a thrilling performance, this recital was a resounding credit to University Music and to the Sound Festival.

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