

Maria Marchant (piano) - Ivor Gurney Hall, 3 November 2019

One word sums up Maria Marchant's piano recital today: atmospheric. Maria's meticulously configured programme pulled together music from diverse composers who had been drawn to the forces of nature as the source of their inspiration. So we had Benjamin Britten, Roderick Williams and John Ireland looking out to sea, while Judith Bingham and Granville Bantock studied the sky at night and a remote beauty spot respectively. But as well as that we explored inner worlds with a brand new work by Adrian Williams, commissioned by Gloucester Music Society and dedicated to its Chairman, Christine Talbot-Cooper.

But Maria began with Handel's 'Chaconne in G major', a busy piece setting out variations on an imposing theme. As an exercise in contrapuntal writing it's fair to say that it is equal in complexity to some of Bach's more well-known works for keyboard.

Britten's 'Holiday Diary' contained four vividly descriptive pieces featuring Britten's typically dramatic trademarks, i.e. rolling arpeggios, dynamic swells and impish rhythmic figures, later to be found in operas such as 'Peter Grimes'. But, being composed early on in his career, the influence of Britten's close composer companions could also be detected. For instance, in the second piece – 'Sailing' – there were hints of the soundworld conjured up in the Piano Concerto of John Ireland, who just happened to be Britten's composition teacher and mentor.

Maria urged composer Adrian Williams to join her out front to talk about his new piece 'Soliloquy'. He explained how it had been shaped by his walks in the Herefordshire countryside and his own inner landscape. And that came across in the music, which grew organically from melodic cells and rhythmic fragments, melded with a recurring theme cast in block chords. Overall it was a deeply impressive work, as absorbing as it was inventive.

The 'Three Pieces' of Sir Arthur Bliss were wildly contrasting, and demonstrated various aspects of the composer's style, from frivolous and almost throwaway on one hand, to rugged and confident on the other.

Roderick Williams is best known as a singer, but his compositions have the same self-assurance as his beautiful baritone voice. Maria included two of his compositions this afternoon. In the words of the composer, 'Goodwood by the Sea' "simulates the ebb and flow of waves through an unfolding ostinato ... and foam-like flourishes", while Roderick Williams' 'Sea Fever' is a self-confessed 'freely arranged' version of Ireland's setting of Masfield's famous poem. Thus it is wordless and blues-tinged.

The atmosphere of Judith Bingham 'Moon Over Westminster Cathedral' is predominantly dark and brooding, shot through with shafts of silvery light. By contrast, Herbert Howells' 'Two Pieces' are almost playful in their treatment of dance forms and folk-like melodies. Bantock's 'Cloisters at Midnight' is an evocative setting of the Kyrie Eleison, while the same composer's triptych 'Memories of Sapphire' is an impassioned work which hints stylistically at the piano music of Chopin, Liszt and Rachmaninov.

Ireland's 'Decorations' came about as a result of his love of the Channel Islands but, in purely aural terms, its inspiration was clearly the Preludes of Claude Debussy. As such, they share the same delicious wistfulness and melancholy.

As a well-deserved encore, it seemed fitting, then, that Maria should conclude her concert with Sibelius' 'Impromptu op.5 no.5', much to everyone's delight.

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