

**LUNCHBREAK CONCERT**  
**In association with S-O-U-N-D**  
**ROHAN de SARAM Cello**  
**SUREN de SARAM Percussion**  
**ABERDEEN ART GALLERY,**  
**Saturday, 14 November 2009**

*by Alan Cooper*

The renowned super-virtuoso of the cello Rohan de Saram was joined by his nineteen year-old percussionist son Suren for a very special Lunchbreak Concert as part of the Sound Festival. The programme included a startlingly wide range of music from Bach to the avant-garde with a piece by the Italian sound experimentalist Salvatore Sciarrino.

As Rohan de Saram said in his introduction, Bach is eternally new. Whether a concert is of early music, mainstream classical, jazz or the avant-garde, Bach's Solo Cello Suites will still find a comfortable place in any such programme. Rohan de Saram chose the Prelude in C Major from the Third Cello Suite to open his programme. Clear fresh playing easily took care of this wonderfully muscular music and set us up for what was to be a real stunner of a recital.

Following Bach, Rohan de Saram introduced his son Suren who, most appositely for an Aberdeen audience played Evelyn Glennie's Little Prayer for Solo Marimba. Although the tune is quite different, Evelyn's piece has something of the same reference to the music of spirituals as Dvorak's "Going Home" from the New World Symphony. It was as sensitively played by Suren as I have heard Evelyn herself play it and the subliminal reference to Dvorak made it the perfect link to another composer from Eastern Europe namely the Hungarian Kodaly Zoltan as his countrymen would call him.

Bach's Solo Cello Suite requires tremendous suppleness, muscularity and technical virtuosity but if anything, the third movement, Allegro Vivace from Kodaly's Sonata for solo cello went quite a way beyond that. This real bravura work which has the full flavour of the composer's love for the folk music of his own country saw Rohan de Saram magically transform his instrument into an entire string orchestra. Most impressive were his effortless leaps from a complex piece of fingerboard work straight on to a perfectly clear and in tune harmonic.

Having brilliantly reaffirmed his credentials as one of the world's most gifted classical cellists Rohan then took the audience gently by the hand and led them into the far reaches of the avant-garde with Salvatore Sciarrino's astonishing sound portrait, Ai Limiti della Notte. I was reminded of an experimental piece by the Swiss/French composer Arthur Honegger Pacific 231 where the orchestra is made to imitate graphically the sounds of a train. Sciarrino however takes the idea light years farther. In the mid 1960's I spent a year living in the centre of a large town in France. The summers are much warmer there than in Aberdeen and it was normal to have the windows wide open at night. Sciarrino's piece brought back to me all the memories of lying in bed trying to sleep whilst being assailed by the night sounds coming from outside. With just his cello and his bow Rohan de Saram gave us the distant barking of a dog, a moped speeding past, the hiss of car tyres on the bypass, noises of police cars or factories at night and so much more. Here was virtuosity every bit as amazing as that which we had heard from Kodaly.

The final written composition in the recital was a world premier. The composer Param Vir was present to introduce his new work which was inspired by a letter left behind by a Danish resistance fighter who was tortured and executed by the Nazis. In this piece, the talents of Rohan and his son Suren were brought together. The piece itself lay somewhere between Bach and Sciarrino, having elements of both the traditional and the avant-garde. Param Vir had these closely and convincingly woven together in his music. Cello and percussion are not the two most compatible sound worlds that a composer would think immediately of bringing together. However Param Vir has achieved this with startling brilliance by making the cello play percussively, the bow striking the string with a sharp rap, while the percussionist is made to use a bow to play the bars of the metallophone or the little bell chimes always perfectly matching the notes played by the cello. The ominous raps of the cello bow were quite striking. Did they represent the ticking of the clock as the Danish prisoner sat in his cell waiting for the next time his torturers would come to fetch him for another session? To follow the dark mood created by this piece Rohan de Saram was joined by Suren on drumkit for a short free improvisation. As I have said before, the trick with improvisation is to make it sound as if the players are using printed music. Nothing must give any suggestion of a player wondering where to go next. Rohan and Suren passed the test with flying colours. They must get on very well together. My father did not even like music but he did teach me to drive and many times our sessions together would come close to violence. Maybe driving is not quite the same as music though.