

alan cooper reviews: rohan de saram, cello, jonathan meyer, tampura and erwan kervec, bagpipes

THE DRONE

Rohan de Saram: Cello

Jonathan Mayer: Tampura and Sitar

Erwan Keravec: Bagpipes

Aberdeen Art Gallery

Saturday, 25 October 2014

Saturday's combined performance by Rohan de Saram, Jonathan Mayer and Erwan Keravec satisfied a main theme of this year's **sound** Festival: namely new ways of experiencing and revitalising long established musical traditions. The three players represented Indian, Western Classical and Scottish or perhaps Breton music. We were to experience all of these in wonderful contemporary fusions.

Rohan de Saram is a long established **sound** favourite and indeed it would be hard to imagine the Festival without him. His celebrated virtuosity extends from Bach and before up to the most contemporary music and right round the world too. He was the perfect choice for performances of music by Jonathan Mayer's father, John Mayer. We were to hear two selections of the composer's Ragamalas one at the start the other at the end of the concert. The idea of the drone was supplied mainly by the tempura played by John Mayer. In the first selection comprising Ragamalas I and II, Rohan de Saram sent his cello soaring through the most dazzling virtuoso flights of fancy. In the second, Ragamalas IV and VI, harmonics were used extensively, something that I suspect is very hard to do unbrokenly but of course for a player like Rohan de Saram it seemed easy. For us in the West this music sounded marvellously exotic but de Saram made us feel perfectly at home with it.

The second item in the programme was a bagpipe solo played by Erwan Keravec. This was like no bagpipe playing I have ever heard before. Keravec played from an adjoining gallery and eventually we could see him as he marched to and fro so I was surprised to see that he was playing what looked just like an ordinary set of pipes but the sounds he was making not only bent the notes but it sounded more like a huge bagpipe orchestra rather than one player. How did he achieve that? I have no idea but it was absolutely wonderful.

John Mayer took us back to the world of Indian music with a superb sitar solo. Here the drone was on the higher strings of the instrument while he was able to play the melodic content on the lower strings.

Cyril Scott was a late romantic or possibly impressionist English composer. I think he would have been amazed to hear today's performance of his Reel from Pastoral and Reel. Actually the cello and sitar gave it a very powerful ethnic sound in which the drone was well highlighted.

There followed an improvisation by the three performers of the theme of Air or perhaps it could have been Wind. Rohan de Saram conjured up that idea at the start playing just above the bridge to give a special wind sound. Jonathan Mayer's playing full of movement added to the effect and Erwan Keravec used the pipes in unusual ways to add breathy colour to the performance.

Before the final set of Ragamalas which topped off the marvellous performance, Rohan de Saram played his own special transcription of György Ligeti's "Loop" from the composer's Viola Sonata. Ligeti's music has appeared regularly at **sound** performance and it encompasses a wide variety of styles. I particularly remember a performance by Red Note in the Lemon Tree. This piece, Rohan de Saram informed us was inspired both by jazz and by the music of Conlon Nancarrow. Today's transcription by de Saram worked splendidly well. In this piece and indeed in the two sets of music by John Mayer I felt the very heart and soul of the cello was being revealed to us.

© Alan Cooper, 2014