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Classical review: Hebrides Ensemble - Canongate Kirk, Edinburgh

By Jan Fairley

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MUSIC and science proved to be consummate bedfellows in this concert to celebrate the International Year of Chemistry.

Beginning with Beethoven's Piano Trio in B Flat Major, Scott Mitchell on piano, Jean Johnson on clarinet and Will Conway on cello set a playful ambience with a piece known as the Gassenhauer trio for its witty variations on a popular 18th century Viennese opera tune. The clarinet's supple, warm tones gave way to a gorgeous melody taken by the cello, shifting beautifully into intricate conversational sparring between instruments.

For Borodin's rarely heard Cello Sonata in B minor, Conway deftly released the deep romanticism inherent in music full of lively melody yet imbued with yearning. A key motif from Borodin's sonata then became the link cleverly taken by the hero of the night, composer Julian Wagstaff, as the springboard for the premiere performance of his work, A Persistent Illusion.

Based on Einstein's observation that distinctions between past, present and future are illusory, its first movement evoked an often poignant exchange between composer-chemist Borodin and chemists Alexander Crum Brown and Joseph Black.

Its quite exquisite second movement saw the piano create chords from notes played by clarinet and cello, intriguingly aping the process of chemical crystallisation. The culmination came with the exuberant third movement: based on manuscripts of chemical structures transformed into musical patterns by Balerno and Gracemount High School students, it flowed agilely from majestic journeying to a rattling 12 bar blues. Who would have thought chemistry could inspire so much fun and at the same time be so moving?

Rating: ****

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