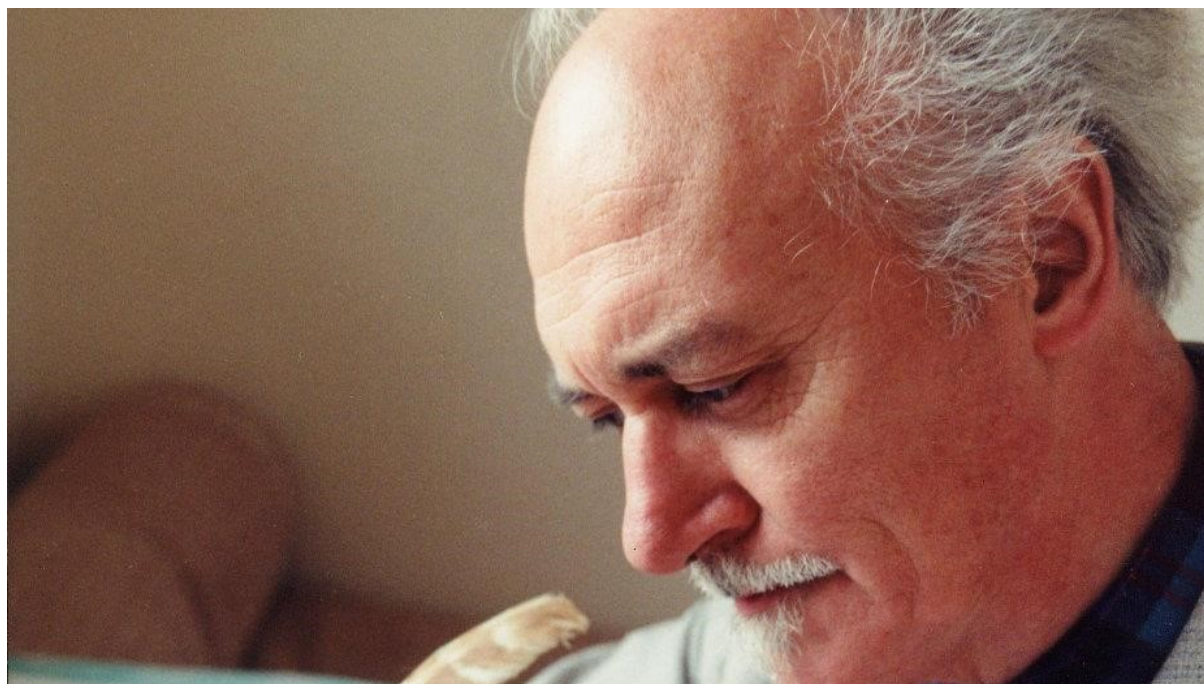


University of Aberdeen Concert Series 2016- 2017



Ronald Stevenson  
(6 March 1928 – 28 March 2015)



King's College Chapel  
2nd March 2017  
19.30hrs

University of Aberdeen Concert Series 2016- 2017

**Performers:**

Joseph Long – Piano

Margaret Preston – Flute

The Choir of St. Machar Cathedral,

Director & Organist Roger B. Williams

### **A Tribute to Ronald Stevenson (1928-2015) Pianist and Composer**

#### **Joseph Long:**

I was privileged to have been a personal friend of the composer and pianist Ronald Stevenson (1928-2015) for many years, and without doubt, he was one of the most profound influences on my development as a pianist and musician.

What Ronald did for us all - his music, his ideals, his warmth and kindness, the way he moved people so deeply, bringing them together and making friends of them, showing genuine interest and a desire to bring out the best in everyone - is impossible to capture fully in a short note like this. One thing is certain, though: Ronald's influence was such a positive force that the essential qualities he embodied, both musically and personally, cannot fail to live on in those with whom he came into contact.

Ronald's desire to reach out and make friends - both with those to whom he felt he could offer inspiration and with those who had, in turn, been a source of inspiration to him - was inexhaustible. Back in 1962, he presented his seminal 80-minute piano work "Passacaglia on DCSH" (based on Dmitri Shostakovich's monogram) to Shostakovich himself. He corresponded with many other celebrated composers, including Walton, Grainger, Bliss, Britten, Stokowski and Sibelius.

In addition to a considerable amount of piano music, much of it influenced in various ways by these composers as well as by Busoni (who he referred to as his "mentor in absentia"), Ronald wrote many choral and vocal settings for poets such as Hugh MacDiarmid and Sorley McLean. He took pride in merging the musics of different cultures in his works (a notable example being his Violin Concerto which is based on Indian ragas), and he spoke in his writings and discussions of the concept of a "world music", a term he used not to signify music that seems somewhat "exotic", but rather to point to a visionary style in which a deep and sympathetic understanding of all cultures is evident and in which they all come to be seen as united, much as all humanity can be said to be united. He strongly believed that music knows no border posts, and he frequently cited Busoni's famous sentence: "Music was born free; and to win freedom is its destiny".

In addition to composing, Ronald was a pianist with formidable technique and musicianship. He often presented programmes with striking literary, musical or political themes, juxtaposing works that would otherwise not normally be heard side by side, and introducing his audiences to unfamiliar works in this way. Starting in his late sixties, a series of strokes gradually but decisively put an end to his professional performing career, but he continued to inspire those he came into contact with, through informal playing, through his continued composing, and above all through his warm, compassionate and deeply illuminating discussions.

#### **Roger Williams:**

'African music is primarily rhythmic and physical. Asian is primarily melodic and spiritual; and European music is primarily harmonic and polyphonic, emotional and intellectual. The sum of the physical, the spiritual, the emotional and intellectual, is the whole being of an individual's life. So the sum of world music is the complete music of mankind.'(Stevenson, *Western Music*, 1971).

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'The country between the Humber-Mersey line and the Forth and Clyde line corresponds to the old +Brythonic Kingdom. This is our real centre of gravity. Most of our heavy industries are centred there – most of our mineral wealth – and statistics show that an overwhelming percentage of Scottish and English genius alike of all kinds has come from that area.'(Hugh MacDiarmid, *Albyn, or Scotland and the Future*(1927)).

It might seem perverse to begin what is necessarily a very short article with two extended quotations, but to give even the briefest of flavours of a remarkable man, who had such vision and diverse enthusiasms – a pacifist, and musical polymath who composed more than 500 works - is an almost impossible task.

The first impression I had of meeting Ronald was his open and friendly nature. This was soon followed up by some craggy thought in which his intellectual honesty was paramount. I found he was a man to whom you spoke freely but always recognized that he might question what you had said, quite sharply, in order to test his understanding of what you meant, but also to challenge your own intentions, that they were well formed. These qualities of absolute integrity of thought and intention were of paramount importance to Ronald Stevenson and this is something that holds his vast canvass of diverse works and thoughts together, presenting to the world challenges which lesser minds have either chosen to ignore or not even recognized. In this way his northern-ness, with its understanding of the importance of what is basic to human existence and experience, is of greater importance than a social veneer of sophistication, more common to those of a southern disposition. Such surfaces had no interest for Ronald Stevenson.

In addition to a near obsession with the composer/pianist Ferruccio Busoni and his opera *Faust* – an interest that had a fascinating counterpart in his love of the Australian polymath Percy Grainger - Ronald Stevenson was also widely interested in music from different parts of the world. This was partly recognized by his recital and teaching activities abroad, but more internally absorbed into an eclectic compositional style.

One of the ideas that drove him was the value of each individual, and the concepts of democracy and fairness colour many of his writings and compositions. So much so that even tonality, with its widely shared understanding of an hierarchy of harmonic allegiances within the supremacy of the tonic, was something that was uncomfortable to his psychological and emotional make up. So it is, that melody has a supremacy – whether as a tune, or as a basis for more extended structures, such as the massive *Passacaglia on DSCH*. The same rationale applies to his harmonic vocabulary and perhaps it is for this reason that his progressions often sound awkward on first acquaintance. What he had to say, using these angular moments, made this just the right vehicle for his music, and was another aspect of his intellectual and musical honesty. There is a phrase that if beauty equals truth then truth equals beauty – something that the great twentieth century Austrian composer Arnold Schoenberg used to use. This is also true of Ronald Stevenson, whether in his performances, his writings or his compositions. We are challenged and what is our response? Just like the man himself. Malcolm MacDonald, in his monograph of 1989 on Stevenson, introduces the book as follows:

'Nature abhors a vacuum, and a straight line. She seems to have created Ronald Stevenson to fill the former, and made it impossible for anyone seeking to understand him to follow the latter.' Welcome to the musical world of Ronald Stevenson!

+Brythonic is a term which has sometimes been used to make reference to Celtic languages, including Welsh, Cornish, and Breton. Hugh MacDiarmid is using the term in an extended way to refer to a whole geographical area, which might well have been Celtic dominated at

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one time, but which has also and arguably been more heavily infiltrated by Norse culture – witness the many common words in local use, from Yorkshire right up to Aberdeenshire, with its highly individual Doric language. Whatever licence the poet has engaged in to stretch the meaning of the word to apply to a large geographical swathe of Britain, there is none the less a great deal of substance in the thought that ‘the North’ has distinctive attitudes to life and culture. This is something that is particularly evident in comparison with the predominantly south-east culture of UK’s media, perhaps most evident in the ‘received’ pronunciation of English.

### **Notes on individual works.**

#### **Ballade no. 4**

Frédéric.Chopin (1810-49)

Chopin's Ballade No. 4 in F minor was the second piece I ever played to Ronald Stevenson (the first being his own Beltane Bonfire). I did not know at the time that Ronald had written a fugue based on it. Chopin was one of Ronald's favourite composers and he discussed many of his works (such as the Preludes and Studies) at length with me and with other friends.

This Fourth Ballade is undoubtedly one of the great works of the nineteenth-century repertoire. Composed in 1842, seven years before Chopin died, it is a work of unrivalled maturity and complexity within Chopin's *oeuvre*. After a brief introduction, the piece begins as if setting out on a fairly typical Chopinesque nocturne-like journey as some kind of theme and variations on a circling, indecisive, poignant theme - one of Chopin's most memorable creations. Other musical elements quickly take over, however, and the piece soon shows itself to be an amalgam of sonata-form and theme and-variations that is uniquely Chopin's own. Halfway through the piece, after the music reaches a climax, the mood softens for one of the eeriest passages in all Chopin, in which the main ballade theme enters in a key far from home, in single notes in just one voice, with other voices subsequently entering in quasi-fugal style, and with the music little by little making its way back towards the tonic. This passage (which is the part of the music that inspired Ronald to write his Fugue on a Fragment of Chopin) might perhaps originally have been influenced by the last few pages of Beethoven's Sonata Op. 110 - the similarities are certainly striking. Unlike the Beethoven, however, the Chopin does not finally throw off feelings of despair or tragedy. Instead, these deepen as the music works itself up to another tremendous climax in an explosion of seemingly jarring and random chords. A brief, numbed silence and five softly played chords then precede one of the most fearsome, technically demanding codas in the nineteenth-century piano repertoire.

#### **Fugue on a Fragment of Chopin**

Ronald Stevenson

This Fugue was written in 1949 (when Ronald was 21 years old) to commemorate the centenary of Chopin's death. The "fragment of Chopin" on which the Fugue is based is taken from Chopin's Fourth Ballade and is quoted in full in the slow central section of the Fugue. The opening section, before this, consists of a traditional fugue in which Chopin's theme is heard in increasingly rich and varied forms. After the passage of original Chopin is played, there is a section of calmness and repose, before the music rouses itself once more for a climax and for its ultimate masterstroke - the transformation of Chopin's theme into a playful up-tempo Scherzo-Finale.

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Ronald always regarded this Fugue with affection. I played it to him on many occasions, and he was consistently complimentary and encouraging. I quickly took to performing the Fugue immediately after the Chopin Ballade itself, as presented here. This was something that Ronald said he had never quite thought of doing in his own performances, but when I put the idea to him, he simply said "why not?".

I was also privileged to have the opportunity of playing the much rarer two-piano version of this Fugue with Ronald during one of the many wonderful summer weekend workshops that the Ronald Stevenson Society ran over the years at Garvald near Peebles and subsequently at Millport on the Isle of Cumbrae. This two-piano version was never set in stone in Ronald's mind quite as much as the solo piano version heard here, and I recall him making alterations and amendments to it even as we were preparing it for performance.

### **Beltane Bonfire**

Ronald Stevenson

This was a set-piece which all competitors were required to play in the 1989 Scottish International Piano Competition, and was the first piece I ever played to Ronald.

Beltane is the Celtic May Day ceremony, still kept alive in the borders town of Peebles. A typical Beltane ceremony would involve the lighting of two fires close together, between which men and cattle processed, symbolising the warding-off of disease and promotion of health. Sometimes they were driven through a hoop of rowan wood; sometimes there were even instances of them being required to jump over the flames. There are parallels with the trial-by-fire in the Magic Flute, from which the music includes a brief quotation.

In his own programme notes on the piece, Ronald takes great pains to point out that the piece is evocative rather than descriptive, and that it is in no way a piece of programme music. His advice to competitors is simply to convey the festive mood.

The more "visual" aspects of the Beltane did, however, serve as an inspiration to Ronald as he was composing the piece, as he himself points out. For example, the piece sets up an association between the pentatonic scale and a sense of purity, and thus the increased use of the pentatonic scale towards the end symbolises purification by fire. Further, the central fugued chorale symbolises people being driven between two fires, with the "human element" being heard as a series of ascending and then descending long notes, played in the middle of the piano keyboard between the fugal subject and its answer. This series of notes is finally heard at the very end of the piece in the purest form possible as the pianist rises from the stool to play it one last time by gently plucking the strings of the piano.

### **Arietta**

Joseph Long (b1975)

Ronald always used to encourage me to compose and was enthusiastic about all of my creations. He gave me a few formal lessons in composition, which were inspirational and which gave me an insight into his musical thinking. The emphasis in his social thinking on human solidarity and fellowship entered into his approach to music, and he would often say to me in order to get me to link musical ideas together "Composition is the art of putting ideas together - *com ponere*, 'to place with'".



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I composed this short Arietta in 1996 at around the time I was receiving formal composition lessons from Ronald. He never heard it in its current form for flute and piano - I had originally conceived of it as a short work for viola and piano, which was the version that Ronald became acquainted with. I suppose at around this time there was a kind of quirkiness - an almost sardonic humour - contained within some of my melodic creations which, although Ronald was happy to encourage, was quite different from anything in his own style. Nonetheless, I like to think that the languid romanticism of this Arietta, its emphasis on manipulation of pure melody, and its rich use of counterpoint (particularly in the final section - still my favourite part of the piece after all these years!) shows Ronald's influence at its greatest.

### **Recitative and Air on DSCH: In Memoriam Shostakovich**

Ronald Stevenson

Ronald's most celebrated work based on the DSCH theme (D, E flat, C, B in German notation) is his monumental Passacaglia (1960-62), a piece that lasts eighty minutes and throughout which the DSCH motif is heard as a constant and unvarying ground bass. At one of the Society's summer workshops in which two pianos were available, we each played allotted sections of the Passacaglia, handing on to the next person in relays to produce a complete performance of the work - an act of collaboration and musical coming-together that educated and enriched all of us as musicians.

Ronald's approach in his later and much shorter Recitative and Air (1974) is different but no less disciplined. The entire melody of the piece is devoted only to the four notes of DSCH, and the interest lies in the inventiveness with which the melody is harmonised, often using the simplest of bass lines and chords. The stark contrapuntal nature of much of the music and the absence of features such as flowing pianistic arpeggios led to the realisation that, although the piece was written for solo piano originally, it would transcribe well for other instrumental combinations with or without piano. Ronald made arrangements of the piece for various solo instruments with piano, as well as for string quartet (and even for string orchestra). The arrangement presented here for flute and piano is my own, although it consists mainly of the violin and piano arrangement with one or two minor alterations. Ronald never heard it, although he was aware that I had made and performed this arrangement.

### **A'e Gowden Lyric**

Ronald Stevenson

The original version of this piece was a setting by Ronald of four lines of Hugh MacDiarmid's epic poem *To Circumjack Cenchratus (or The Curly Snake)*. The lines are as follows: "Better a'e gowden lyric / Than the Castle's soarin' wa' / Better a'e gowden lyric / Than anything else ava!". The music captures the simplicity, unpretentiousness and golden warmth of the words. MacDiarmid's poem as a whole is somewhat similar to his earlier masterpiece *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* in that it moves from topic to topic, linking subjects together in a somewhat random and tangential manner. Unlike the earlier work, however, *To Circumjack Cenchratus* is somewhat sprawling and less successful as a whole for that reason, and Ronald was therefore surely right to confine his setting to four lines of the poem only. He made an arrangement of the song for violin and piano: the arrangement presented here for flute and piano is my own.

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### **Thou shalt not kill; Blessed are the peacemakers** Ronald Stevenson (from **Four Peace Motets**)

These two motets are the first and last of a work that was premiered in 1988. The text of the first is, of course, one of the Ten Commandments quoted in The Bible as the 17th.verse of the book of Deuteronomy. There is just the one line of text but two musical ideas. The first, a descending arpeggio knurled out by the voices used in pairs, the second a gently sinuous line in a suave quiet dynamic. Developed through inversion and thematic extension, the piece reaches a climax with aggregated dissonant chords, until the final resolution of an open fifth. The Seventh Beatitude is a setting of verse 7 of the fifth chapter of St. Matthew's gospel. The mood is entirely different with a beautifully descending melodic line at the top of the texture. It is worth noting on the opening phrase that each time the word 'peace' is sung it rises a tone – truly an emphasis built right into the very fabric of the music. The second verbal phrase 'For they shall be called the children of God' contrasts by being in unison and in using triplets. If ever there was a work of this composer that shows his outstanding level of compositional craftsmanship this is the one.

### **Two motets**

Sir James Macmillan (b.1959)

In a programme of music by Ronald Stevenson, why include music by a composer who is still alive? James MacMillan has, like Stevenson, forged his own musical vocabulary, which is recognisably Scottish. He is a rigorous musician of enormous imagination. He thrives on total honesty of intention and, like Stevenson, has forged his own musical path, beholden to few models which have been fully absorbed into an eclectic style, which can raise profound thoughts and emotions. Though the sound of their music may differ, they are in a very real sense connected, by both accuracy of musical concept and precision of technique.

### **Think of how God loves you**

This anthem is a setting of words taken from the Gospel of St. John, Chapter 1, and from the Baptismal Rite of the Church. The composer wrote this simple setting for his Granddaughter, Sarah, for her Baptism. It was published in 2011. An opening section is cast in four part harmony, with a strictly written rhythm that still manages to sound free. The central section is in a plainchant of the composer's own composition, ending with three joyous cries of 'Alleluia'. The opening section is then repeated.

### **A New Song**

This motet is a setting of words taken from Psalm 96, composed in 1997, using two different, contrasting musical gestures. The opening chorus is set in the dark key of e minor and is characterized by its bareness of harmony, with a prominent open 5th. The second and fourth sections of the piece tap into the West coast of Scotland tradition of Psalm singing, with each of the four voice parts proclaiming an independent line. Throughout, the organ serves both as a supportive but also as a solo instrument – in which capacity it blossoms in a fine, optimistic coda.

(JL and RBW Feb.2017)

**Concert series events coming up:**

**11<sup>th</sup> March:** UoA Opera Society – Sweeney Todd

Arts Centre and Theatre

13.00hrs + 19.30hrs

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**12<sup>th</sup> March:** Marischal Chamber Orchestra Butchart

Recreation Centre

19.30hrs

~

**15<sup>th</sup> March:** Spectrum New Music Group King's

College Chapel

19.30hrs

~

**16<sup>th</sup> March:** Paul Koonce – Electroacoustic Music

King's College Chapel

19.30hrs

~

**17<sup>th</sup> March:** UoA Choral Society St.

Andrew's Cathedral

19.30hrs

For more information about the concert series and for information regarding tickets for future concerts, see our website at: <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/music/events>