

Music at St Andrew's Concert Review

O Duo and Morgan Szymanski Saturday 9 May 2009

As Ian Smith proclaimed before the evening concert, O Duo are the first performers to return to St Andrew's since the concert series began. Having been unable to attend their first appearance last

year, I was determined to take full advantage of their return, beginning with the afternoon workshop. The two members of O Duo, Owen Gunnell and Oliver Cox, met while studying at the Royal College of Music and are now in their seventh year performing as O Duo. Both members are hugely passionate and enthusiastic players, these beliefs becoming immediately apparent as the workshop began.

Attended by over twenty five intrepid individuals, with all age groups represented, the workshop began with the two performers introducing some of the more obscure percussion instruments; the djembe, a high-pitched hand drum from West Africa, and the surdo, a low-pitched drum used primarily in Brazilian sambas.

Owen and Ollie then turned our attention to the two large, looming marimbas behind them. Owen pointed out that the layout of these percussion instruments is very similar to a piano except all the notes are the same colour! The duo then demonstrated the huge range available on these instruments by playing a short preview of a piece by Bach that they would be playing that evening. Then, after a short burst of "Take 5" by Owen on the vibraphone, attention turned to the other participants in the workshop as we were



invited up, row by row, to improvise on the marimba. One of the volunteers was asked to play a rhythm in any style or tempo, to which the others would add their own accompaniment, no matter how simple

or complicated. This provided lots of amusement for those watching and taking part as some interesting music was composed in front of our very eyes!

The session ended with shakers, cowbells, and claves being handed around as the group was taught a very quick samba "groove". A hugely enjoyable hour, we were happy to finish off playing as a complete ensemble, though we no doubt all wanted to stay longer! It goes to show that there is something universally accessible about percussion, whether you are listening to it or joining in.

For the evening concert, O Duo was joined by Morgan Szymanski on guitar. Morgan was born in Mexico City and also studied at the Royal College of Music where he met Ollie and Owen. They made their debut as a trio at the Wigmore Hall, for which occasion Steven McNeff wrote the piece *Los Ambulantes* which had its Bedford premiere, as Morgan rightfully pointed out, tonight.

O Duo burst on to the stage with the piece they start most of their concerts with, the self-penned *Bongo Fury*, which Owen pointed out is probably the only piece written for two pairs of bongos, two cowbells and an egg shaker! The pair added variety by making use of their sticks and themselves as



instruments - clapping, whooping and circling the bongos. This set the scene for what proved to be not only a musically impressive evening but also a visually spectacular display of agility and enthusiasm.

Those who may have been concerned about the volume of the first piece were no doubt put at ease by the more mellow tones of Morgan's guitar in combination with the two marimbas in the next part of the concert. Overall, there was a South American focus to the pieces combining guitar and percussion, which was most noticeable in Machado's *Suite Brazilienne*. Originally written for guitar duo, the percussion added a vibrant aspect to the already colourful music. We were delighted to hear from Morgan that the second movement's title translated literally as *Little Cheese Balls*, perhaps providing some inspiration for the next pre-concert supper!

The following two pieces were the highlight of the programme, with O Duo turning their attention to classical music as they played pieces by Bach and Chopin on two marimbas. The flowing nature of both the baroque counterpoint and the romantic étude seems perfectly fitted to the unconventional instrumentation. The Chopin provided the musicians with a platform to display their virtuosic skills as the entire eight foot length of each instrument was covered at high speed, with incredibly complex chromatic sequences. Rapturous applause ensued.

The first half of the concert culminated with the aforementioned *Los Ambulantes*, a piece written about the circus-like skills of the roadside street sellers in Mexico City in contrast with the poverty of their living conditions. These images were reflected in the music which was itself full of contrasts in mood, tempo and volume, and unexpected harmonies.

Following the indoor strawberries and cream, which were efficiently distributed by a team of St Andrew's volunteers, the concert resumed with Morgan performing the beautiful, meditating *Una Limosna por el Amor de Dios* by Barrios Mangoré; the emotive arpeggiated chords perfectly accompanied by an exquisite tremolo. O Duo returned to for two pieces by Piazzolla, the second of which, *Escualo*, mimics the sharks (for which the composer was very fond of fishing) with a tropical lilt behind the menace of the shark.

What followed, *Marimba Spiritual* by Minoru Miki, is something of a signature tune for the duo. Morgan even claimed he had listened to it twenty-eight times in a row at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival! However there was nothing to suggest that the duo were bored of playing it, as they approached it with the same vigour as they did all their other pieces. In two sections, the first a sombre lament in memory of the African famine of the 1980s, the second a fearsome battle between percussion and marimba, the piece encapsulated the overall contrasts in the concert, spanning from peaceful reverie to highly energetic musicianship.

The programme ended on a relaxed note with Bellinati's *Jongo*, in which even Morgan was able to add some percussion of his own by tapping his guitar. This was followed by an impromptu rendition of *El Marabino* by Antonio Lauro as an encore.

This concert was a hugely enjoyable event, made even more so by the performers' relaxed and often humorous introduction to each piece and each other. Their musical collaboration provided a fresh experience to those of us in the audience and the queue for CDs afterwards confirmed this.

Roll on 2010!

Josh Redmond

