

Scottish Chamber Orchestra/Joseph Swensen, Amy Dickson (saxophone)

Queen's Hall, Edinburgh

★★★★★

A short Saxophone Concerto, in three movements of about five minutes each – James MacMillan's modest, rather self-effacing description of his new work for Australian-born saxophonist Amy Dickson and the Scottish Chamber Orchestra might have made it sound like a lightweight, occasional piece. It was anything but.

Transforming and subverting seemingly innocuous Scottish traditional music forms – a strathspey, a reel and a jig, plus rich heterophonies nodding to Gaelic psalm singing – it seemed, like so much of MacMillan's recent music, as if there were an agenda being played out, a story being told. What that was, however, remained an enigma.

In musical terms, however, it was a remarkably concentrated, punchy, pungent piece, with extraordinarily inventive, piquant writing for his string orchestra – played with gusto and biting precision by the SCO strings under an energetic Joseph Swensen. Dickson seemed occasionally to be still finding her feet in conveying the work's drama, but she gave a beautifully nuanced account nonetheless, full of subtle, luscious colours, not least in the keening lines

and remaining onstage during the interval, posing for photos with the multitude that want them.

As ever, he swaggeringly reiterates his belief that everything is essentially nonsense because we're all part of some higher, vaguely spiritual collective energy, which he then sets about testing with some lively crowd work that far exceeds normal audience participation.

Demanding that an electric wheelchair user transport him back to the stage as he straddled her lap, he'd previously requested that the emboldened fill in a questionnaire when they purchased their tickets, allowing him to identify them by seat number and put them on camera as their sexual humil-

of the slow movement. Dickson's succulent tone came into its own in her velvety account of Glazunov's Saxophone Concerto, which she delivered with utter conviction.

And Swensen provided two thought-provoking bookends to the two concertos, with the SCO on blistering form. His opening Sibelius Pelleas and Melisande was dark, sonorous and gutsy, brilliantly alive to each movement's often surreal picture painting. His closing Beethoven Eighth Symphony – so brisk it seemed over in a flash – crackled with glee – and it's not often you see a conductor having so much sheer fun on the podium.

DAVID KETTLE