

Christopher's Classics - at The Piano, Christchurch - 27 September 2022

Aroha Trio: Haihong Liu - Violin; Zhongxian Jin - Viola; Robert Ibell - Cello

Reviewed by Tony Ryan

If the String Quartet combination inspired many composers (Haydn, Beethoven, Schubert, Brahms, Bartok, Shostakovich . . .) to some of their greatest and most deeply personal utterances, the String Trio medium seems to have encouraged their less serious sensibilities. Both Beethoven and Schubert left us works in both forms and, in this Christopher's Classics concert, the Aroha Quartet-minus-one brought us, as the Aroha Trio, examples of both composers' lighter side in a programme that was sheer delight.

Schubert wrote several pieces for string trio and, while the single completed movement of his *String Trio in B flat major D 471* might be considered an early work, we should remember that by this time the eighteen-year-old composer had already written some of his most well-known songs as well as many instrumental pieces, not least the wonderful *Fourth Symphony*.

Aroha Trio's performance of this string trio movement demonstrated the vitality and communicative spirit that remained hallmarks of their playing throughout the evening. Perhaps Schubert realised that this movement was not among his most inspired inventions, so a second movement was abandoned after just thirty-nine bars and, despite this fragment's inclusion in the printed programme, was abandoned altogether by Aroha Trio. Nevertheless, it was an apt start to an engaging and lively evening.

Salina Fisher's '*Mata-Au*' for *String Trio* which followed, proved one of the highlights of the concert, especially in the sensitive and committed playing by Aroha Trio. It was also the programme's single more serious piece with its affectingly genuine and personal expressiveness. All three instruments contributed to Fisher's textures in a more individual and dynamic way than in Schubert's more classical homogeneity. The viola part in particular emerged as an important anchor, with warm melodic ideas surrounded by cleverly imagined and diverse colours from the other instruments. The work's intended programmatic associations with water, spring, places and people may have been the composer's inspiration but, more importantly, the music communicated its expression effectively without any need for us to know these connections.

The first part of the programme ended with Ernő Dohnányi's 1904 *Serenade in C major for String Trio, Op. 10*. The variety of its five movements brought effective contrasts of mood, tempo, texture and technical demands, all of which were realised with playing of fervour and panache. But, impressive as this ensemble's virtuosity was in the Dohnányi *Serenade*, the absolute joie-de-vivre they brought to Jean Françaix's 1933 *String Trio* was even more captivating. This music is not challenging for the listener; we were simply able to sit back and enjoy the masterful and energetic playing of the three musicians on stage. From the lively opening movement, the fun and diversity of the *Scherzo* as it danced with insouciant waltz rhythms, to the 'after-party' sadness of the muted *Andante* and the carefree vivacity of the final *Rondo*, every fast-changing, chameleon-like incarnation of mood and technical demand was perfectly projected right up to the final, almost throw-away, final pizzicato.

After all that novelty and frivolity, Beethoven's more refined, although still light-hearted, classical manners failed to quite engage in the way that they might have if his *Serenade in D, Op. 8* had been played earlier in the programme, and I confess that my attention waned somewhat. Unlike me, the musicians of Aroha Trio maintained their effervescent and communicative energy, but by now the programme was beginning to feel a little long. However, by the time we reached the final variations of the last movement, the infectious flair of the playing brought me back to life and the well-deserved and enthusiastic audience response reflected the enjoyment that Aroha Trio brought to this penultimate Christopher's Classics concert for 2022. Let's hope they return to the series before too long.