

**Christopher's Classics 2022 – NZTrio – Amalia Hall (violin); Ashley Brown (cello); Somi Kim (piano)**

**At The Piano, Christchurch – 21 April 2022**

*Reviewed by Tony Ryan*

Schumann's *Sech Stücke in Kanonischer Form (Six Pieces in Canonic Form)* are slight in content and comparatively little-known, but in the hands of NZTrio the two movements that opened this programme were pure delight. The way in which the players allowed the music to flow with detailed, but seemingly intuitive spontaneity, was simply exquisite. Every phrase was lovingly caressed as one player handed the lead to another in turn, setting the tone for the superlative music-making that we enjoyed throughout the whole concert.

The première of Michael Norris's newly commissioned *Horizon Fields* was far less easy to assimilate on a first hearing. Norris frequently uses works of art for inspiration and, in this case, Antony Gormley's installation *Horizon Field Hamburg* was the composer's stimulus. Fortunately, before this concert I took the trouble to watch some of the videos of this artwork on YouTube. I did wonder how such a work, featuring an enormous lacquer-coated steel platform suspended seven metres above the ground could be represented in music; but there it was – instantly and recognisably embodied in sound! Gormley's piece is interactive, allowing viewers to walk on it and to experience the vibrations and movements of others walking/sitting/standing on the platform. In Michael Norris's conception it was almost as if the players were responding involuntarily to one another's 'movements'; for example, a flourish from the piano would trigger a shimmer on one of the string instruments which was then echoed by the other as a ripple-effect. I overheard a comment that the music seemed like little more than a series of sound-effects, but familiarity with Gormley's original artwork certainly makes the music far more logical and meaningful. However, that makes me wonder if the visual aspect of Gormley's work is an essential adjunct to fully appreciating Norris's music. The composer has, after all, retained the essence of Gormley's title, and the length of the piece, despite its wide variety of novel effects and techniques, would certainly have worn a little thin if I hadn't prepared myself so fully. It's worth commenting that, in one of the videos I watched, a group of people were moving in unison on the platform with rhythmic, repetitive, and apparently choreographed movements, and I couldn't help wishing that something of that more rhythmic quality could also have been represented in Norris's work. Even so, NZTrio gave a performance that demonstrated total commitment to and affinity with the music. Their flair, collaboration and expressive skills certainly made the very most of this new work.

The first part of the programme ended with a three-movement *Trio* written in 1998 by Nikolai Kapustin (1937-2020). Considerable technical and stylistic demands were very much in evidence throughout this work, but the vitality of its effervescent jazz style made for very enjoyable listening. If the listening was easier here, the playing certainly wasn't. The virtuosity demonstrated by NZTrio in Kapustin's *Trio* was simply astonishing. Once again, their affinity and commitment were convincingly communicated and, in comparison to the previous works, the change in stylistic body language, particularly from cellist Ashley Brown, was infectious. And NZTrio seemed to have dressed for this work – the sophistication and elegance of the two women's clothes required only cigarette holders and champagne glasses to complete the visual picture in support of the composer's inventive take on 1920s American jazz styles.

Then, a change in dress to match Ashley Brown's already more colourful apparel seemed to bring added flamboyance to part two of the programme which was devoted to Beethoven's great *Archduke Trio*; and what an extraordinary difference this exceptional performance was compared to another interpretation we heard last year by another ensemble. Whereas last year I commented that "tranquillity and refinement seemed to be prioritised over projecting the work's inherent passionate expressiveness", in this performance we experienced Beethoven's inspiration with total conviction, considerable risk-taking and inspired abandon. But polish and precision are never absent when the three members of NZTrio are so intuitively attuned to one another. If the letter of this great score was always followed, it was enhanced by a spirit of genuine insight with notably expressive phrasing and all the shades of dynamics between the written *fortes* and the *pianos*. The whispered playing by the strings in the *pizzicato* section of the first movement's development, accompanied by the subtlest of dancing *pianissimo* trills from the piano, was breathtakingly magical; and the timing of the transition from the *adagio* ending of the third movement to the dancing *allegro* of the finale was so perfectly judged that the entire fourth movement had an exceptionally uplifting effect.

Christchurch audiences are rather economical with their applause and, while no encore would have added anything to this concert, NZTrio need to know that our response was internally rapturous, if less outwardly demonstrative than they deserved. And thank you Christopher's Classics for regularly bringing this 'National Treasure' to our concert stage.