

Christopher's Classics 2022 - NZ Chamber Soloists - Lara Hall (violin), James Tennant (cello), Katherine Austin (piano)

At The Piano, Christchurch - 28 June 2022

Reviewed by Tony Ryan

Apart from the *Poco adagio* from Dvořák's *F Minor Piano Trio* played movingly by NZ Chamber Soloists as an encore in memory of the late Christopher Marshall, there was nothing familiar on this programme; nothing to grasp as a pivot from which to reach out into four works which most of us are not acquainted with.

For me the highlight was certainly Jenny McLeod's *Dark Bright Night*, a short movement full of contrasts, with passages of exuberant joyousness giving way to dance-like episodes and moments of wistful nostalgia. This work was commissioned by NZ Chamber Soloists as part of their 7 x 7 project to commission seven NZ women composers to each write a seven-minute piece for piano trio. Jenny McLeod's *Dark Bright Night* was the one piece in this concert that I look forward to hearing again, and it bodes well for a fascinating project that I also look forward to hearing when complete.

I couldn't help noticing an interesting textural similarity between a few bars of McLeod's work and the opening of the other piece on the programme by a woman composer, where the piano plays a unison phrase a couple of octaves apart; a distinctive and ear-catching technique. But there any similarity with Rebecca Clarke's 1921 *Piano Trio in E flat minor* ends. While McLeod's *Dark Bright Night* was full of characterful invention and individuality, Clarke's *Trio* was pleasant and engaging without projecting any distinctively personal 'voice'. Pianist Katherine Austin talked about the piece's 'English countryside' atmosphere and its sense of loss after the war. I failed to hear any real English countryside reference in this music and, although there are moments of evident despair in Rebecca Clarke's musical vocabulary, its general style seems rather derived from her contemporaries such as Bridge and Stanford; and there is also a definite influence of Ravel (did I hear an almost direct quote in the first movement, from Ravel's *String Quartet?*), when impressionist harmonies and timbres rise to the surface before reverting back to more traditional tonal sonorities.

Chinese-American composer Bright Sheng's *Four Movements for Piano Trio* (1990) certainly demonstrated his Chinese background with some exquisitely refined sonorities - at times some of the strings' delicate harmonics sounded so like a Chinese flute that the effect was quite uncanny. The range of string sonorities contributed significantly to the Chinese influence and even the piano played its part, with the player occasionally reaching inside and plucking the strings. On a first hearing these pieces had a certain novelty value, although I can't say that I'm particularly eager to hear them again.

NZ Chamber Soloists' programme had originally listed a work by another Chinese composer, Gao Ping, whose music has made a much more significant impact on me in the past than the *Four Movements* by Bright Sheng. But Gao Ping's work was one of the casualties of a change of programme announced after Russia's invasion of Ukraine at the end of February. The other casualty was Shostakovich's *Piano Trio No. 1* which might well have provided the linchpin that this concert needed as a reference-point for so much unfamiliar fare. Although not heard as often as his *Trio No. 2*, it's a work of considerable appeal and youthful confidence; full of the same quirky originality found in the composer's *First Symphony* which launched him to prominence as a nineteen-year-old.

In his introduction to Arno Babajanian's *Piano Trio in F sharp minor* (1952) as the replacement for the Shostakovich *Trio*, cellist James Tennant drew our attention to the reason for the change as "events made certain works unsuitable". In the event Babajanian's *Piano Trio* proved an agreeable enough substitution. I particularly enjoyed the vitality and tunefulness of the final movement but, overall, this music emerges as watered-down Khachaturian, never quite daring to match that composer's willingness to share his emotions openly and honestly in a way that makes his ballets and concertos so memorable and exciting.

NZ Chamber Soloists played this work, as they did all the music on the programme, with their usual technical brilliance and commitment. But it was a programme that took no prisoners and needed that central, resonant choice of repertoire to ground us for so much that was unfamiliar.