

## Christopher's Classics - at The Piano, Christchurch - 17 July 2022

### The Morton Trio: Arna Morton - Violin; Alexander Morton - Horn; Liam Wooding - Piano

Reviewed by Tony Ryan

Three years ago we heard The Morton Trio in Brahms' famous (and authentic) *Horn Trio* in a notably inspired performance. In this concert we heard another Brahms *Trio* which, while the composer never imagined it in this form, sounded just as authentic in an equally idiomatic performance.

Brahms' *B Major Trio* was written for the standard piano trio combination of violin, cello and piano. For this concert, violinist Arna Morton transcribed the cello part for her horn-player husband, and I couldn't help feeling that if Brahms heard Alex Morton's gloriously soaring opening phrase, he would willingly have stipulated the horn as a valid alternative, just as he stipulated cello or viola as valid alternatives in his *Horn Trio* of fourteen years later. Brahms also set a further precedent when he stipulated the viola as an equally valid option in his two clarinet sonatas.

Apart from the realisation that this transcription puts the horn, for much of the first three movements, into the rather awkward key of F sharp major, I was also aware of a couple of other consequences. Most noticeable was the proportion of time that the horn is required to play in its lowest register. But the player was equally at home in all registers of his instrument. In Brahms' actual *Horn Trio*, apart from a single pedal note near the end, the horn never descends into its bass clef range.

My other observation involves phrasing. Whereas, in that soaring opening phrase, Brahms requires the cellist to play each note with a separate bow as *legato* as possible, the horn achieves the same effect in a single arching phrase. Later in the work, there were a very few times when the need for a breath caused the occasional phrase ending to be 'dropped' slightly but, despite my usual aversion to inauthentic arrangements, Alex Morton and his fellow players gave us a very satisfying and convincing performance that needed no excuse, even if it meant that the horn was always dominant in a way that the cello isn't. Even so, violinist Arna Morton brought the same tonal intensity to her playing that we'd already witnessed in the programme's opening *Sonata* movement, and pianist Liam Wooding's intuitive feel for imaginative phrasing and tonal colour in response to his colleagues' music-making was consistently beguiling.

Brahms' *Scherzo* from the so-called *F.A.E. Violin Sonata*, written the year before the *Trio*, was the perfect opening to this generous and appealing programme. The movement's catchy melodic and rhythmic qualities enabled both Arna Morton and Liam Wooding to establish their credentials as soloists of real personality, with an ability to easily project the essential character and expression of the music to the listener.

Schumann's *Adagio & Allegro for Horn and Piano* may not be among the composer's greatest music, but in a live performance of such flair and character, it proved another excellent choice in this very well-planned programme.

The first of the two Brahms major works ended part one of the concert. Arna Morton's opening statement of the *G Major Violin Sonata* was simply exquisite in its touching and under-stated expressiveness. Brahms' first *Violin Sonata* is truly magical, with all three movements demonstrating the composer's deeply expressive Romanticism at its best, and providing the players with infinite opportunities to find its many instances of heart-felt revelation. Both players were able to bring something fresh to this music and, although Arna Morton tended to play for the moment, relishing the music's every inspiration, Liam Wooding's ability to convey a sense of each movement's structure and direction made their collaboration complementary.

The Morton Trio called their programme *Metamorphosis*, clearly a reference to the transcription of the Brahms *B Major Trio* around which the concert was planned, and its also worth mentioning the very engagingly written programme notes in the printed programme - personal and unpretentious without any of the academic austerity that we're too often patronised with.

One final observation - for the second half of the concert, and for the first time in my experience, the venue's acoustic screens were lowered around the upper walls of both stage and auditorium. This had no detrimental effect on the opulence and tonal variety of the instrumental sound, but the reverberation time was certainly reduced. Perhaps this feature could have a more beneficial effect on spoken-word events, but I think The Piano's undamped wood panelling is more helpful and dynamic for unamplified music performances.

Repertoire for the combination of violin, horn and piano is certainly rather limited, but I hope the members of The Morton Trio will put their thinking caps on and return to Christopher's Classics in the not-too-distant future, especially when their music-making is as consistently captivating as in this concert.