

Christopher's Classics - at The Piano, Christchurch - 28 July 2022

Levansa Trio: Andrew Beer - Violin; Lev Sivkov - Cello; Sarah Watkins - Piano

Reviewed by Tony Ryan

I remember, in my teens, the beginnings of my voyage of discovery of classical music – the appearance on radio (often a commercial station) of a piece that knocked me sideways, a recording played by a teacher while he sat marking more important subjects than music, a school visit to a recital by a visiting pianist or chamber group, and so on. Random selections of LPs from the thread-bare record bins in Timaru department stores also resulted in first encounters with many wonders.

Gradually the frequency of new discoveries diminished until those special encounters have now become rare. But last night's inspiring performance of Georgy Sviridov's *Piano Trio in A Minor* (1946/1955) was one such occasion. The three players of the Levansa Trio projected the music's drama, colour and expression with such open-hearted commitment that it was the perfect introduction to this music. Back home I quickly found a superb recent recording online which I have now added to my collection (it's playing as I write) but, fine as that recording is, it cannot compare to the experience of last night's Levansa performance.

A few particularly distinctive moments deserve mention:

The exceptionally beautiful final section of the first movement *Elegy* was simply breathtaking, especially in the way that the musicians on stage found every last drop of its heart-lifting expressiveness. Then the energetic *Scherzo* began with virtuosic energy leading to a sweeping ending of overwhelming and unstoppable impetus. The following, exquisitely beautiful *Funeral March*, mixed tragedy with a degree of wistful romanticism and, in the fervently passionate and technically brilliant hands of the Levansa Trio, the final *Idyll* brought a sense of peace in the face of darkness – acceptance rather than regret.

The Sviridov work ended this concert except for an encore – one of English composer Frank Bridge's delightful miniatures for Piano Trio – and, while this was played with all the flair and joyousness of the whole programme, I couldn't help thinking that I would have preferred to leave the hall with Sviridov lingering in my mind's ear. Encores are rare in Christchurch, as we carefully ration our applause, but the enthusiasm of this concert's audience demanded an exception.

The programme began with Beethoven's first published work, the *Piano Trio in E flat Major* (1795) and, although we heard the same work played by another group in last year's Christopher's Classics series, the Levansa Trio's performance had so much more of the "sunshine, humour and joy" that pianist Sarah Watkins mentioned in her brief welcome at the end of the piece. If I didn't know that this trio was by Beethoven, I would have sworn it was by Haydn, especially in this vibrant and infectious performance. It certainly showed the influence of Beethoven's illustrious teacher more than in his more innovative first three piano sonatas written around the same time, or the first string quartets of just a couple of years later.

Bohuslav Martinů's three-movement *Piano Trio No. 2 in D Minor* was another less familiar piece and, like Sviridov's trio, it brought a degree of welcome revelation. I'll be looking to hear this again soon too, especially for its brilliantly energetic and spectacular final *Allegro*, played here with such risk-taking abandon and vitality.

New Zealand composer Claire Cowan's 2015 *Ultraviolet* proved an engaging opening to the second part of the concert. Its rhythmic liveliness and ear-catching harmonic shifts never allowed our attention to wander. The piano's predominantly minimalistic character is nicely juxtaposed against the more evocative string contributions, although both the violin and cello parts are unable to resist occasional enticements to join the hypnotic rhythms led by the piano. *Ultraviolet* is a well-crafted and appealing work – a concisely structured piece whose repetitive rhythmic motifs never outstay their welcome.

But now – I can't resist listening to that extraordinary Sviridov trio just one(?) more time . . .