

# New Zealand String Quartet

Christopher's Classics - at The Piano, Christchurch - 9 November 2021

Reviewed by Tony Ryan

**The New Zealand String Quartet** is an annual visitor to the Christopher's Classics series. In this final concert of the 2021 season these four superb musicians brought their usual refinement and insight to works by Purcell, Britten, Gao Ping and Smetana.

The association of Britten with the music of Purcell is well documented, especially in several of the later composer's works based on Purcell originals, notably *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* and 'realisations' of various hymns and songs. So, pairing these two English masters on the programme was an astute idea. In both cases I was struck by the *modernism* of the music. Although Henry Purcell died when both Bach and Handel had barely turned ten years old, the harmonic daring and passing dissonances of his contrapuntal writing in the *Three Fantasias* on this programme were quite striking for their boldness and in the occasional element of shock that they projected. But the NZ String Quartet kept these moments of surprise perhaps a little too much in check with their refined and carefully controlled style of performance. While the players conveyed a clear sense of their commitment to these pieces, their almost Romantic phrasing with its legato elegance somehow lessened the impact of Purcell's invention.

*String Quartet No. 2 in C* is my personal favourite of Britten's three works in the genre, and it was very satisfying, at last, to encounter a live performance of it. And, if it didn't have quite the same headlong fluidity that I'm used to from some recorded versions, it remained an enjoyable and engaging performance. The cadenzas in *Chacony* were played with flair and vitality and, overall, I was surprised by the 'modernness' of the music in a way that hadn't previously struck me.

But, for me, the most successful performance on this programme was Gao Ping's *Prayer Songs*. Here, all four players made the most of the composer's special brand of appealing originality, taking the lead by turns and contributing to the myriad variety of colourful textures when required. In the first two of these four short pieces, Gao Ping's Chinese heritage was noticeably to the fore in a way that easily connected with Western ears; something that is becoming increasingly evident in an age of artistic attempts to break down borders. The light-heartedness of the final piece was also a welcome aspect of both the music and the performance, when new 'classical' music can often take itself too seriously. The live performances of Gao Ping's music that I've encountered over the last two or three years are evidence of a very original creative mind that seems easily able to engage the listener, as was evident from this audience's response, and the NZ String Quartet certainly projected these qualities in a way that would surely have pleased the composer greatly.

I have long been a fan of both of Smetana's two string quartets. If the second is slightly less well-known than the first, it remains a gloriously expressive and emotionally charged work. But in this performance I found something awkward, although difficult to put a finger on, about the playing. There was plenty of stylish phrasing, committed vitality and genuine engagement, but somehow an element of Smetana's particular Bohemian idiom was missing, and the music seemed to lack some degree of an overarching shape. It's hard to define but, in such a familiar work, I was puzzled by the inability of the music to fully make its mark in the way that I'm used to, especially when, outwardly, the playing was so fervent and committed. Hints of common ground with the quartets of Dvořák and Janáček were sporadically evident, and the music's inherent tuneful nature made it a heart-warming end to this colourful and well-devised programme, and the end of another hugely successful season of Christopher's Classics.