

Christopher's Classics - at The Piano, Christchurch - 22 September 2022

Liam Wooding - Piano

Reviewed by Tony Ryan

There's a certain improvisatory quality to Liam Wooding's playing that brings everything vividly to life. Every note comes off the page with vitality and expressive imagination in a way that conveys the spirit of the music rather than just the letter of the notes on the page.

These qualities were evident from the very first bar of Mozart's *Sonata in F Major, K. 332* as the music just seemed to emerge from nowhere the moment the player sat at the keyboard. Liam Wooding's phrasing of the opening theme of the first movement was so natural and fluid that the classical strictness of the written crotchets and quavers became almost inconsequential. The pianist's intuitive feel for the weight and length of each note made a long-familiar piece come across as new and original. Nothing was fussy or calculated; there was a natural sense of "what shall I do next", as if Mozart himself was savouring his own inventiveness, so that the rigidity of the movement's 'sonata form' structure seemed more rhapsodic; less formulaic. Not that the movement lacked shape; it's just that musical expression took precedence and made the structural aspects part of that expression.

These same characteristics carried over into the beguiling *Adagio* of the sonata before Wooding launched into the energetic final *Allegro* with a risk-taking abandon that occasionally stumbled as if fingers could not quite keep up with the inspiration of the moment. But this just made the music-making all the more impulsive and engaging.

The spontaneity and fluency that Wooding brought to Mozart was even more evident in the Bach-Busoni *Chaconne from Violin Partita in D minor No. 2*. After another Christopher's Classics recital a couple of years ago I praised Michael Houston's playing of Busoni's transcription for its understated vision and naturalness. If Liam Wooding's performance was less understated, it served to demonstrate that great music-making requires the player to bring their own insights to any given work, especially an established and revered masterpiece. In Wooding's performance, just as with Houston's, I found myself thinking "this is how this music should be" and, in the moment, I wouldn't have it any other way. Here the pianist highlighted the contrasts between each variation so that its creative genius was communicated with even more impact than I have previously been aware. That same intuition for tonal weight and expressive phrasing brought an additional degree of moving eloquence to the performance.

These hallmarks of Liam Wooding's playing proved ideal in conveying the fleeting visions of the twenty miniatures that comprise Prokofiev's *Visions Fugitives*. From the wistful daydreaming of *Lentamente* (No. 1) and the whimsical playfulness of *Ridocolosamente* and *Con vivacità* (Nos. 10 and 11), to the mock-ferocity and agitation of Nos. 14 and 19 respectively, every transient mood was captured and communicated with convincing individuality.

Australian composer Carl Vine's 1990 *Sonata No. 1*, brought something far less familiar to the programme. Liam Wooding's welcomingly personal and engaging programme notes make it clear that he holds this work in high regard. Its two eight(ish)-minute movements certainly gave him ample opportunity to demonstrate the strengths of his artistry. As in the Prokofiev, there were moments of whimsy and introspection, but also forthright and energetic virtuosity. The lightness of touch and racy technique that the pianist brought to the opening of the second movement, along with the following sudden changes of mood, texture and technical demands, made this sonata a propitious addition to a varied and appealing programme. I very much look forward to future opportunities to hear this player.