

Christopher's Classics – Robert Orr with the Aroha String Quartet

The Piano, Christchurch – 3 September 2020

Reviewed by Tony Ryan

Comparisons may be odious, but as someone who attends so many live concerts, I can't help referring to my most memorable musical encounters as benchmarks in the search for similarly uplifting experiences. So, while this concert from the Aroha String Quartet with oboist Robert Orr may not have equalled the best of those we have heard in the Christopher's Classics series in recent times, there was still much to enjoy.

Inevitably, Beethoven's great *Rasumovsky Quartet* Op. 59, No. 1 in F Major stood out as the glorious centrepiece of the programme. The Aroha Quartet made the most of all the effects and beauties of the four movements, with many telling contrasts of dynamics and articulation impressively communicated. If their polished ensemble and internal balance didn't quite match those of the New Zealand String Quartet, whom we've twice heard playing Beethoven in this series recently, the Aroha's greater sense of spontaneity and flair were notable features of their performance. The expressive slow movement in particular had a committed and effective emotional clout. These players' approach to the faster movements tended towards the cheerful rather than the more unsettled intensity that some groups find in this music, but such a masterpiece has many facets and it's always gratifying to discover a new perspective in a long-familiar work.

The programme was bookended by two works which featured the principal oboist of the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra. I well remember Robert Orr's first appearances with the NZSO where his contributions on Cor Anglais brought some very classy solo playing which was symptomatic of the orchestra's development as it rose to its current international reputation. In that orchestral context Robert Orr's playing still retains an easy and natural sense of phrasing and expression and, while that was also evident in this concert, the repertoire for oboe is less grateful in the chamber context.

Benjamin Britten's early *Phantasy Quartet for Oboe and Strings* is an appealing movement and, although it may not be among the composer's greatest works, some very well-known pieces followed in a very few years. The string writing here reminded me very much of the instrumental character of his opera *Albert Herring* of fifteen years later, but the oboe part seemed uncharacteristic of Britten's later, confident and highly memorable melodic flair. Almost inevitably, the oboe takes on a more soloistic role in combination with three string instruments, but all four musicians brought commitment and character to the rather lightweight nature of this music.

I'm not going to pretend that I got much out of Alex Taylor's *Refrain for String Quartet* on a first hearing. However, listening to it again today on YouTube, from a slightly earlier incarnation of the Aroha Quartet, it seems to assume a more structural and expressive logic. Even during the concert, the music's wide range of articulation and effects was very obvious, from extremes of range and dynamics to harmonics, multiple stops, *sul ponticello* and much else; a second hearing makes all this seem much more integrated into the expressive fabric of the piece. Even so, this is music for the inner circle of musically informed aficionados; not 'music for the people' in the way that the majority of composers, past and present, intended their works. It's easy enough to search out dismissive contemporary reviews of music we now consider to be masterpieces, but those are very much the exception. Let's not forget that almost every great composer from the past was popular and considerably feted in their own lifetimes; witness the funeral processions of Beethoven and Verdi as (perhaps extreme) examples. For my own part, repeated listenings to *Refrain for String Quartet* certainly brings greater understanding and appreciation, but I remain unmoved.

To end the programme, Robert Orr re-joined the full quartet for Sir Arthur Bliss's 1927 *Quintet for Oboe and Strings*. The programme notes mention Richard Strauss, Stravinsky, Schönberg and Korngold as audible influences on this music, but all I could hear was Delius. And, like Delius, although this style evidently strikes a decisive chord with the English psyche, it seems to me that it loses most of its appeal and relevance the further it travels from the shores of Dear Old Blighty. Performance-wise, again, the oboe takes on the role of soloist among the five players, but Bliss's oboe writing also includes a significant amount of doubling with the first violin. Generally, it all came across as lively or nostalgic by turns in another committed performance from these accomplished musicians.