

Christopher's Classics 2022 - Darroch/Cowan Duo - Hannah Darroch (flute); Steve Cowan (guitar)

At The Piano, Christchurch - 5 May 2022

Reviewed by Tony Ryan

Towards the end of this concert, flautist* Hannah Darroch thanked us for "taking a risk" by attending an unfamiliar instrumental pairing of unfamiliar music. In the event it was a risk worth taking, with such a variety of musical styles, resonances and technical dexterity that, dare I say *surprisingly*, an hour-and-a-half of flute and guitar unfailingly held our attention and never wore thin in terms of what I had feared could be a certain uniformity of texture and timbre. In fact, the range of both of those aspects of both the music and its performance was a kaleidoscope of colourful diversity.

If the opening work on the programme, Argentinian composer Osvaldo Golijov's *Fish Tale* (1998), remained my personal highlight of the evening, it had the beneficial effect of fully engaging us with the inventiveness of the works that followed. But *Fish Tale* was a delight! The players' printed notes gave us some initial guidance as to the music's surface programme, but its expressive content was more deeply convincing. The "sounds of an African thumb piano", and the wind, and the tornado, were all clearly audible, but these superficial encounters were simply the 'hooks' on which the composer hung a wide range of emotional associations, ending with a soulful waltz of exceptional beauty and wistfulness. Throughout this piece, the variety of colours and techniques required by Golijov's seemingly endless musical and imaginative invention was fully realised by the two players. The composer used so much timbral contrast – flutter-tonguing, note bending, percussive sounds, harmonics, and so much more – that I wondered if there were any other possibilities until some of the works that followed introduced us to guitar strums above the fret-board, and did I hear a few vocal effects in Katherine Hoover's *Canyon Echoes* (1991) with its references to indigenous Apache culture, and Robert Beaser's *Mountain Songs* (1985)?

Four pieces written in the 1980s by another Argentinian, Astor Piazzolla, came closest to anything really familiar on the programme. The two *Tango Études* for solo flute struck me as less characteristic of what I know by this composer, but the *Campero* for solo guitar and *Café 1930* for flute and guitar conveyed that distinctive nostalgia, almost as if the musicians are playing for themselves – expressing their own private feelings – rather than for an audience. This bracket made me aware of the predominantly intimate and subtly nuanced nature of so much of the music chosen by these two musicians; there were certainly extended moments of extrovert virtuosity and technical brilliance, but the overall impression as I left the concert-hall was one of introspection, at times almost melancholy.

I first became aware of the music of U.S. composer Joan Tower in 1999 when I heard a recording of her *Concerto for Orchestra*. Always on the lookout for new works that seem to have something special to say, I quickly went out and bought the recording on an album entitled *Fanfares for the Uncommon Woman* which also contains five very effective pieces with that title. Her *Snow Dreams* (1983) for flute and guitar, although played evocatively by Hannah Darroch and Steve Cowan, didn't have quite the same enlightening effect, but it's certainly a piece I'd like to hear again in light of my admiration for this composer.

By the end of the concert I was becoming aware of a certain 'sameness' in the timbre of the standard flute but, throughout the programme, monotony was avoided by Hannah Darroch's (and the composers') use of piccolo and alto flute for several of the pieces. No such alternatives were needed from Steve Cowan on guitar as he demonstrated an infinite variety of articulation and changing colours on his instrument. Both musicians proved themselves to be masters of their respective instruments and also masters of a consistent musical communication that made the "risk" very worthwhile.

*Although in her notes and spoken comments Darroch used the French-derived term 'flutist', most commonly used in North America, I personally prefer the Italian-derived 'flautist' that became the fully accepted English term for a flute-player during the nineteenth century.