

Les Bons Vivants

Christopher's Classics – at The Piano, Christchurch – 3 October 2019

Amandine Guerin (violin), Mark Menzies (violin, viola), Tomas Hurnik (cello), Helen Webby (harp), Anthony Ferner (flute), Jenny Johnson (oboe)

Reviewed by Tony Ryan

A whole concert of new stuff! Well, new to me anyway.

It seems that we live in a time when craving for 'the new' in music, at least in 'classical' music, is a thing of the past. That's not so for other music styles. I well remember, growing up in the sixties, my own craving for the next Beatles song, or the latest single from Dinah Lee, Simon and Garfunkel or Dusty Springfield. But, as a teenager, I was also discovering the great classical masterpieces. This was sometimes through the radio or, with the help of a holiday job, buying from whatever random and limited LPs were stocked by a couple of department stores in Timaru. I also quickly exhausted the titles at the local library, although many of the discoveries I made by these means became life-changing. My craving for new discoveries extended to searching through my grandfather's old piano stool and, much to my piano teacher's horror at my trying to run before I could walk, buying up sheet music from the local music shop – Beethoven *Sonatas*, Liszt *Hungarian Rhapsodies*, Khachaturian's *Toccata*; or whatever else looked promising. The very few live music events that came to Timaru also occasionally brought a revelation or two.

Ever since those days of almost weekly discovery, I have continued to search for something new, and every year I take stock of the new discoveries from the previous twelve months that have remained important for me. This year it could well include the music of Gao Ping.

This final concert in the 2019 Christopher's Classics series from Les Bons Vivants included my third live encounter this year with Gao Ping's music. The first, as part of Free Theatre's Ars Acustica back in January, also featured Mark Menzies who, since taking up a post at Canterbury University, has been responsible for a string of challenging and provocative wake-up calls regarding stagnation in the presentation of classical music, in terms of both performance and content. Established musical organisations tend to operate by reacting to a perceived public need for the tried-and-true, paying little more than lip service to any role or responsibility to nurture the ongoing development of musical creativity. When they do, it's too often with material that fails to provide a hook into anything that's already part of our formative and cherished experience, or it panders, somewhat patronisingly, to a lowest-common-denominator with material that has no intrinsic or genuinely creative substance.

The most classical or 'standard' piece on this programme was JC Bach's 1772 *Quintet in C for Flute, Oboe and String Trio*. As far as I could tell, the only reason for its inclusion was to highlight its sheer dullness as a way of highlighting the novelty and invention of what followed. Had we been given, say, one of the young Mozart's Salzburg *Divertimenti* from the same year, the contrast would certainly not have been so dramatic. But then, I suppose, the combination of instruments that comprises Les Bons Vivants might have been a limiting factor. Even so, the playing of the group was spirited and polished with some impressive wind solos, especially from Anthony Ferner on flute in the final *Variations*. But I certainly don't care if I never hear this piece again. Its level of invention is certainly inferior to much of the music of another of JS's sons, CPE Bach.

A work written sixty-five years ago could hardly any longer be described as 'new', but that's how Mel Powell's 1954 *Divertimento for Flute and Harp* still comes across to ears that are more attuned to works written in the same year by the likes of Shostakovich, Britten, Vaughan Williams and Stravinsky; or even Lutoslawski's wonderful *Concerto for Orchestra* or Varèse's *Déserts*. OK, some pieces need a few hearings before they start to 'click' but, try as I might, I can't find this Powell work on the internet; nor can I find any audio of Powell's Pulitzer Prize winning *Duplicates* concerto which Mark Menzies writes about in euphoric terms in his programme notes.

Anyway, the *Divertimento* is a work of energy, variety and contrast, with both Menzies (on violin) and harpist Helen Webby demonstrating considerable commitment and vitality in their response to the piece's various demands. Despite Menzies' usual vitality and notably characterful playing, I found most of my focus going to the harp. As a composer myself, I have always tried to be considerate to harpists in allowing space for pedal changes but – no more! The way Helen Webby managed the work's demands for constant pedal changes while she played some very technically difficult music, almost turned it into a totally chromatic instrument. The harp's variety of timbres and effects were not as fully

explored here as they were later in Gao Ping's piece, but it's a beautiful sounding instrument that makes a welcome change from piano as partner to other instruments.

Jean Françaix's 1934 *Quintette pour Flute, Violin, Alto (viola), Violoncelle et Harpe* brought us well within our comfort zones with many familiar stylistic resonances. The utter 'Frenchness' of the music was the first thing that struck me. That could partly be due to Ravel's *Introduction and Allegro* for a very similar combination of instruments, and which was clearly an influence on Françaix's work. Its sound world is very much in the Massenet-Debussy-Ravel line, full of elegance, sunshine and impressionist perspectives. But it also kept reminding me of Hollywood movie musicals of the period; the slower movements could almost have been romantic love songs written for stars of the silver screen. Les Bons Vivants brought joyous playing to the *Scherzo* and *Finale* with a contrasting degree of appropriately sentimental swooning in the *Andantes* – beautifully effective and engaging.

Student composer Rosa Elliott's *a painting of three, for flute, violin and harp* is a new work, here receiving its première. I have encountered Elliott's music before, and this trio confirms her tendency towards peaceful and contemplative expression, creating a rather tranquil mood. But the music is grounded in realism, not quite falling into the mystic minimalist vogue whose motivation, if there is one, eludes me. This piece conveyed a vaguely Chinese impression (was there some use of the Han scale?), especially from the flute, whose timbre was very suggestive of that tradition. The harp also provided some notably atmospheric moments, and violinist Amandine Guerin, as in other pieces on the programme, brought an almost understated beauty of tone to her part. I always try to listen to new music before reading about it. The programme notes later informed me of the inspiration behind Rosa Elliott's composition, making me want a second go at hearing it, but the impression on the night was of a pleasant, well-crafted, if uneventful, work.

It seems that the whole programme and, indeed, the formation of the ensemble for this concert, was based around a desire to perform Gao Ping's *Shuo Shu Ren (The Storyteller)* of 2001. Just four days before this performance, I attended another concert featuring music by Gao Ping, a new work commissioned for, and played grippingly by pianist Tony Chen Lin. So bowled over was I by that performance (as I also was by the *Ars Acustica* piece mentioned above), that I looked forward eagerly to tonight's piece. It didn't disappoint. The *Overture* and the two *Tales*, in particular, were full of engaging and expressive music, bursting with effects and each within a convincingly fluent structure. The two *Monologues*, one for cello and the other for flute, were less immediately compelling, finely played as they were by Tomas Hurnik and Anthony Ferner respectively. But listening again today to a performance from Stroma on YouTube in the presence of the composer, those movements begin to fit more logically into place. However, watching the Stroma performance makes me very aware of just how fine Les Bons Vivant were here. They gave us a significantly more energetic performance with a real sense of 'living inside' the music and an ability to engage the audience fully. Effects such as foot stamping and knocking on the bodies of their instruments were carried off naturally and convincingly. Their handling of more familiar effects such as flute flutter tonguing, string *sul ponticello*, some beautifully diaphanous harp glissandi (harmonics?) were all very impressively delivered. The oboe is not known for its special effects, but Jenny Johnson's contribution both here and in the Bach *Quintet* was colourful and full-toned.

Interestingly, Les Bons Vivant didn't use a conductor as other performers of this work do. Instead various members of the ensemble gave rhythmic directions and cues when needed, and the whole work was cohesive and full of vitality.

By the way, the presence of CSO principal clarinetist David McGregor on stage as page-turner for the harpist, made me wish that Les Bons Vivants had found space for the Ravel *Introduction and Allegro* that I referred to above.

Gao Ping's piece was the only one on the programme written for all six instruments, but the whole ensemble ended this programme with a version of Elena Kats-Chernin's 1996 *Russian Rag* in a beguilingly nostalgic performance that sent us away smiling.