

Christopher's Classics 2021 – Concert for Stars of the Future

Lixin Zhang (Piano)

The Piano, Christchurch – 22 July 2021

Reviewed by Tony Ryan

A few minutes-or-so into Chopin's *Ballade No. 1 in G minor* with which Lixin Zhang opened his recital tonight, I had a sudden feeling of déjà vu – of having heard him play it once before, a few years ago. Later, a quick check revealed that, on that previous occasion, it had been the fourth *Ballade*. What I remembered in particular, alongside undoubtedly outstanding pianism, was an impression of a rather episodic approach to the piece's structure – a young player indulging his sense of youthful discovery in every spontaneous moment of Chopin's inspiration. Listening again now on Tidal to his recording of the piece, which must have been made around the same time at the age of about fifteen, that episodic impression is still present if less problematic than I remember from the live performance.

But tonight, in this first of the composer's four *Ballades*, there remains no hint of any such structural compromise; the talented student prodigy has graduated from technical wizardry and expressive indulgence to mature musician – an artist who can renew the listener's fading appreciation of a long-familiar masterpiece.

That musicianship was confirmed in a truly wondrous performance of the same composer's great *B minor Sonata* that followed. The sense of an overarching structure played as much of a part in Lixin Zhang's expressive armoury as his technical mastery and endlessly beguiling phrasing. And if, tonight, Chopin's written dynamics were sometimes treated as a guide rather than gospel, I'm sure that Chopin did the same in his own well-documented improvisatory style of playing.

In the final movement of the sonata Lixin Zhang's dramatic playing of the introductory leaping octaves led into an almost subdued statement of the main subject, but this soon proved to be an ideal strategy that enabled the music to progress seemingly inevitably, even relentlessly towards its triumphantly climactic end. A performance to savour and rejoice in, certainly.

After the displays of drama and virtuosity in that first part of tonight's programme, the far less technically demanding Mozart *Sonata in C Major* K330 which opened part two revealed the real musician. Sometimes described as "too easy for children and too difficult for adults", Mozart's piano sonatas are usually placed at the start of a recital as a warm-up to enable the player to get the feel of their form as well as of the audience and venue. Not so here! This sonata has passed under my own fingers many times but, much as I've always enjoyed Mozart's captivating rhythmic and harmonic nods and winks in the piece, sitting back hearing it in the hands of a player such as Lixin Zhang highlighted so many delights that only a musician of genuine insight can unveil. Just one example – in the middle of the *Andante Cantabile* second movement, the sudden change from F major to F minor and, later, back again, was quite magical, no matter how often I've heard and played it before.

Another Chopin piece followed; this time one of the shorter works for which the composer is so popular. The *Nocturne in C minor* Op. 48 No. 1 is one of those pieces that justly confirms Chopin as the 'master of the miniature', especially when the player before us tonight turns its mere six-and-a-half minutes into such a deeply expressive and, at times, dramatic tone poem.

Liszt's *Vallée d'Obermann* may not be among that composer-pianist-showman's most popular show-stopping hits, but if Lixin Zhang chose it to demonstrate his musical coming of age, he could not have chosen better. Here Liszt, the deeply thinking intellectual artist, disguises his consummate virtuosity behind a profoundly expressive tone painting that requires a combination of technique, varying tone colour, inner control and formal understanding that only a true artist should dare attempt. Tonight the young man on stage before us seemed to have mastered it all.

Then, the introduction of two tiny children, apparently pupils of the pianist, onto the stage to play a duet, initially seemed just a bit too cute as a segue from what we had just experienced. But as their tiny legs dangled high above the pedals of what suddenly looked like an unusually enormous concert grand piano, their well-schooled, accurate and full-toned playing became a reminder that their teacher, once a talented student himself, has become the mentor who passes his experience on to the next generation, and who then played us his own meltingly beautiful encore to end this inaugural Christopher's Classics Concert for Stars of the Future.