

Christopher's Classics – at The Piano, Christchurch – 21 May 2019

Mark Menzies & Gayle Blankenburg – Pianos; Justin DeHart & Roanna Funcke – Percussion

Reviewed by Tony Ryan

As with most musical events in which I've encountered Mark Menzies over the last few years, this one was full of challenges, surprises and exciting discoveries.

Although the printed programme was full of detailed information about the music and the performers, I decided to just let it all speak for itself. Sometimes explanations, signposts and descriptions can be useful when trying to access the expression and communicative intent of the composer but, in the end, if it can't survive without such explanations, then it's not succeeding as music.

Debussy – *Lindaraja* & *En Blanc et Noir* – For two pianos

Debussy's *En Blanc et Noir* for two pianos pops up on radio from time-to-time, but I can't say it's among the piano music of this composer that I'm familiar with. Even after this hearing, I still need another listening or two to find more of Debussy's inspiration in it. But what did emerge very clearly in this performance was the exploration of sonority that makes all of his music so original. And the sounds that emerged from the two grand pianos were certainly enough to engage the listener. That combination of immediacy, with just enough physical distance between players and audience, is something that is really only possible in a live performance. Recordings are usually a little too close or, when they try to include the ambience of the venue, not close enough.

The pianos projected easily into the auditorium and the two players, Mark Menzies and Gayle Blankenburg worked seamlessly together, enjoying the exploration of the diverse sonorities that Debussy had devised. In the 'slow and sombre' second movement there was an impressive sense of spontaneity as the pianists seemed to respond to each other's touch and sound.

But it was another of Debussy's pieces for two pianos opened this concert. In *Lindaraja* the clarity and variety of the textures were subtly and clearly projected in a work that was totally new to me. Mark Menzies spoke of the work's qualities and it was indeed a welcome and engaging discovery.

Steve Reich – *Nagoya Marimbas* – For two marimbas

From two concert grand pianos, this innovative programme moved to two almost as large and equally imposing marimbas. These, along with the array of other percussion instruments towards the back of the stage, were a striking visual framework to the opening piano works. Now Justin DeHart and Roanna Funcke put them to good use with a typically minimalist-style piece by Steve Reich. In *Nagoya Marimbas* for two marimbas they moved through its rhythmic transformations with impressive virtuosic ease and remarkable coordination. Playing from memory, the performers and their six mallets (three-a-piece) moved around these magnificent-looking instruments with hypnotic effortlessness, ending with a unified flourish that drew warm applause from the large audience.

George crumb – *Music for a Summer Evening* – (Makrokosmos III)

Finally, all four musicians came together to perform George Crumb's early 1970s *Music for a Summer Evening* for two pianists and two percussionists. The array of percussion instruments used was rather extraordinary. I won't list them, but a look at the [programme notes](#) is well worthwhile to get an idea of the vast variety of timbres that the composer requires the four musicians to deliver. For those in the audience who might not have encountered music of this sort before, Justin DeHart talked us through many of the instruments and techniques that were to be used and Gayle Blankenburg also indicated that the sounds produced by the pianos were also far from conventional. Add to this some vocal interjections of various sorts and the sound world of Crumb's work proved to be a marvel of atmospheric variety and contrast.

Apart from being gripped by the technical machinations of this music, I didn't find myself responding equally to every part of this five-movement, forty-minute work, but the beauties of the movements entitled *The Advent* and the final *Music of the Starry Night* left me with a desire to hear them again. In an effort to do so, I encountered Justin DeHart in a [YouTube performance](#) from Pomona College, California from eight years ago.

So, gratitude again to Christopher Marshall for bringing us such an off-the-beaten-track concert. There's certainly a place for this repertoire and, with Mark Menzies now based in Christchurch, we'll no doubt have further opportunities to look forward to.