

Christopher's Classics 2020 – 12 March 2020 at The Piano, Christchurch

Michael Endres – Piano

Reviewed by Tony Ryan

Beethoven year has begun! . . . and begun in the most spectacular and original way in this first concert of Christchurch's 2020 Christopher's Classics season.

As we enter the auditorium, The Piano's splendid Steinway sits provocatively alone on the empty stage surrounded by newly and beautifully wood-panelled walls. Enter Michael Endres upstage right and, for the next ninety minutes that emptiness is filled with wonders.

Endres' performance links all three works on the first part of the programme so that they continue from one to the next without a break: Haydn–Schoenberg–Beethoven. Haydn's 1790 *Six Easy Variations in C Major* are full of whimsy and classical perfection, and the pianist makes the most of their improvisatory variety and boundless imagination with such poise and vitality that they make a delightful start to this recital. The pause between the final variation and the first of Schoenberg's *Six Little Piano Pieces* of 1911 is no different from that between each of Haydn's *Variations*. The first Schoenberg piece seems almost like the next variation until a few notes in, at which point Haydn's tonal organisation is replaced by Schoenberg's atonal "complete liberation from form, symbols, cohesion and logic". Each of these miniatures averages less than a minute, and their contrast with one another is as comprehensive as each of Haydn's *Variations* but with none of the classical composer's motivic unity or tonal relationship.

Then, with a similarly pre-emptive pause, we're suddenly in the throes of Beethoven's great *Sonata in F minor, Appassionata* and somehow, from the outset, its revolutionary spirit seems even more defiant than Schoenberg's. If Beethoven rebelled against the musical constrictions (as he saw them) of his teacher, Haydn, he did so with such inner conviction, truth and genuineness that Schoenberg's atonal initiatives seem contrived by comparison, especially when we consider that he was writing his great Romantic manifesto, *Gurrelieder*, at exactly the same time.

Both Michael Endres' programme and his method of presentation were clearly designed to emphasise the colossal genius of Beethoven and how, 250 years after his birth, he continues to tower over all those around him. Intriguing and engaging as both the other two works are, in this recital they merely served to highlight the mighty creative inspiration of a true masterwork. And Michael Endres gave us a performance full of power and conviction with technical risk-taking that rendered any slight inaccuracies irrelevant.

I sometimes feel that the impetus of this sonata's first movement is lost if the Andante is taken too slowly; it can often seem disconnected and indulgent. But Michael Endres treated it more as a 'con moto' link between the two outer movements, giving the whole work a cohesive unity that made it all the more powerful. And the sense of passionate abandon as the final movement raced to its fervent conclusion had a spirit of inevitability that made this performance one which I'm sure those present will long remember.

And if all that wasn't enough, the second part of the programme brought us a very rare treat. Franz Liszt wasn't the first to arrange Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* for piano, but Liszt's version is so convincing as an effective piano work that it leaves all others in its wake. Even more than in the *Appassionata Sonata*, Michael Endres brought the power and grandeur of the music fully to life. It's no wonder that several audience members chose to move back a few rows before the onslaught of the symphony.

For me, the performance revived awareness of so many harmonic delights which I'd lost track of in my familiarity with the orchestral original. The end of the second movement in particular revealed Beethoven's seemingly endless ability to find new expressive ideas in his thematic material; and the Finale came up like a restored painting as the notes and harmonies took precedence over texture and timbre. Both Liszt's arrangement and Endres' performance gave new life to a long familiar work and, consequently, my appreciation of one of Beethoven's greatest creations has been enhanced enormously. Michael Endres wisely omitted the exposition repeats in both the first and last movements; even so, his reserves of stamina were easily as impressive as his musicianship – a truly stunning start to this Beethoven anniversary year. So much for "dead white guys"; this one's music lives on with as much relevance and expressive power as the day it was written.