

Christopher's Classics – Michael Houston
The Piano, Christchurch – 28 November 2020
Reviewed by Tony Ryan

Michael Houston's rather matter-of-fact stage manner belied the heart-melting projection of the opening bars of Bach's keyboard *Partita No. 4 in D*. From that point on, Houston's ability to convey the essence of Bach's expressive range regardless of the outwardly restrictive forms of the movements of the Baroque suite, radiated from every phrase.

For once, in a live performance of a Bach keyboard work, it was that expressive ingredient that dominated Saturday night's performance for me. In the livelier *Courant* and *Gigue* movements, the pianist's exceptionally impressive textural clarity and technical dexterity were always at the service of the 'heart' of the music; and his intuition for contrasts of emotion and insights into the composer's intellectual range emerged with a feeling of spontaneity and seeming inevitability. Michael Houston never used the power or dynamic possibilities of the modern concert grand piano to make a point or to emphasise his own perceptions of the music; he simply let the music speak for itself in a way that only a musician of his calibre can achieve.

But the wonders of the *Partita* that opened this programme hardly prepared us for the *Chaconne* which followed. Here again, we heard a performance of such naturalness and simplicity in its presentation that it's difficult to know where to allocate the credit between Bach, Busoni and Houston. This *Chaconne* from Bach's *Partita No. 2 for solo violin* has long been central to the repertoire of every violinist of note but, as Michael Houston points out in his very personal and helpful programme notes, Busoni's transcription is equally beloved by pianists.

If Houston's performance of the fourth Partita transmitted the expressive, spiritual and intellectual essence of Bach, Busoni takes that a step further. The later composer doesn't 'intervene' in Bach's creation so much as simply reveal what he hears and feels in it himself. All of us, with the hindsight of all the music that we now know from beyond Bach's time and place in history, inevitably hear his music differently and with wider resonances than his contemporaries. Busoni simply helps us to see further inside the extraordinary world of this astonishing masterpiece. If, again, the benefits of the modern concert grand were unknown to Bach, Busoni is able to use it to reveal more of the visionary qualities than the actual written notes imply; and Houston then adds, without overstatement, his own life-experience and perception in a way that brings us even closer to the marvels and spirituality of this piece.

For myself and many others, Michael Houston's Beethoven has long been a peak of the life-enhancing experience that music and art can give us. But, if the Beethoven performances in this concert didn't quite reach the heights of the Bach pieces in the first part of the programme, they remain significant interpretations of music that many of us have known as long as the player himself.

As a listener, the *Hammerklavier Sonata* was one of my earliest attempts to get to grips with Beethoven's less easily assimilated works. Its great *Adagio Sostenuto* struck me from the start as a vast landscape whose special beauties are highlighted by the rugged and misty terrain of its surrounding lower reaches. In singling out this movement from the rest of this biggest of Beethoven's sonatas, Michael Houston highlighted these peaks even more, and I know from conversations with others in this audience, that, for them, this was the programme's highlight.

But personally, like the famous *Waldstein Sonata* that followed, I wondered if Houston's deep immersion in Bach in recent years led to a performance that tried to 'let the music speak for itself' in the same way that made the Bach pieces so special. For me, the pianist's approach to Beethoven's dramatic contrasts of tempi and dynamics were less overt than I have become used to; this music seems to demand more input of the player's personality in quite a different way than in Bach. Whereas Bach's keyboards were far less capable of dynamic and expressive contrasts compared to Beethoven's, especially by the time he wrote the *Hammerklavier*, the later composer is known to have made the fullest possible use, as both a player and a composer, of the rapidly developing range and capabilities of the piano.

Even so, this was certainly a concert to treasure and remember.