

Christopher's Classics – The New Zealand String Quartet plays Beethoven Quartets

The Piano, Christchurch – 9 July 2020

Reviewed by Tony Ryan

We're back in a real concert hall at last thanks to Christopher's Classics and the New Zealand String Quartet!

Although many of us have been exploring online concerts and enjoying some very imaginative virtual performances, there's nothing like being together in an actual performance venue with the musicians playing just a few metres in front of us.

As the quartet's cellist Rolf Gjelsten said before the group's first piece, "We're lucky to be in this country. Most of our colleagues in other parts of the world are still unable to rehearse or perform together" . . . and certainly not in the presence of a live audience.

Christopher's Classics' 2020 season started back in early March with the first of a planned series of Beethoven-themed concerts and, surprisingly, only one of these has been replaced (by tonight's concert) and another postponed until later in the year.

And it's still Beethoven year, so the New Zealand String Quartet's programme featured three of his quartets; and we're to get three more from them in another Christopher's Classics concert scheduled for 20 August.

Tonight's concert began with one of the early quartets: Op. 18, No. 2. Despite the 'early' designation, it's already the work of a very experienced composer who, by the time of its composition in 1899, had many distinguished works to his credit, not the least of which are ten of the piano sonatas including the famous *Pathétique*.

This *G Major Quartet* still shows the influence of Haydn, but with many signs of the innovations and originality that would develop considerably in Beethoven's later works. The NZSQ gave us a performance full of animation and poise, with a beautifully co-ordinated approach to phrasing, dynamics and articulation. But therein lies a problem – I never quite felt that the players conveyed a sense of spontaneity; everything emerged as carefully rehearsed and strictly controlled. Any sense of the-inspiration-of-the-moment seemed just out of reach. The three upper strings also restricted themselves to a very subtle degree of vibrato, which often limited the firmness and fullness of tone that I felt was needed. Considerable animation was visually present in faces and body language, but somehow failed to fully permeate into the actual sound.

The same problem characterised the following E-flat Major 'Harp' Quartet, where even the delightfully ebullient *Presto* movement seemed just a little too held-in-check. An occasional slight imperfection in intonation was perhaps also a symptom of so many weeks of being unable to work together in the way that such a group relies on in order to achieve its maximum unity of ensemble.

The E Minor 'Rasumovsky' Quartet contains a greater element of virtuosity and required the musicians to allow themselves more abandon and panache but, even here, they never permitted themselves to take any real risks, giving priority to unity of ensemble, balance and polish.

That unity, balance and polish was vividly effective in all three works and the clear sense of animated involvement of all three musicians was extremely impressive, but when I compare this to the best of the many chamber music performances that have emanated from this stage, I just wished for a degree more spontaneity and the excitement that can come from risks taken in the inspiration of the moment.