

Christopher's Classics 2022 - New Zealand String Quartet

At The Piano, Christchurch - 2 June 2022

Reviewed by Tony Ryan

If cultured refinement, tonal blend, superior technical polish and a carefully controlled expressive palette are your criteria for musical perfection, then the New Zealand String Quartet will easily fulfil your requirements. But, for me, as often with this ensemble, something more is needed.

I've attended numerous NZSQ performances over the years - Beethoven, Bartók, Dvořák, Farr and so many others - but the one that sticks most firmly in my memory is the quartet's contribution, some fifteen-or-so years ago, to a theatrical adaption of Tolstoy's *The Kreutzer Sonata* when their performance of Janáček's quartet of that name was presented in an extraordinary out-of-the-comfort-zone presentation with all four musicians, even cellist Rolf Gjelsten, playing as they moved energetically around the stage area in a performance of riveting vitality and expressive abandon.

These days, the quartet has settled on a concert formula that prioritises the more restrained attributes that I've listed above, supported by a carefully crafted stage tableau of elegant salon-style evening dress, and with the cellist on a raised platform to match the standing positions of the other three players.

To be fair, there was one component of this programme that I found notably more engaging and inspiring. William Walton's *Quartet in A minor* (1946) is, as Rolf Gjelsten told us, not often heard. He also talked about its more Romantic spirit compared to Walton's cinematic and other music of the 1940s. However, the lively second movement struck me for its similarity of spirit to the *agitato* and *con malizia* (with malice) sections of the composer's *First Symphony* of ten years earlier. And here NZSQ played with the sort of unrestrained attack that I missed in other parts of the programme, and they also demonstrated their ability to match and respond to one another's spontaneity with an intuitive vitality of expression that, although impressively disciplined, came across as less carefully controlled than elsewhere.

Caution was also discarded in the equally energetic final movement. Here we were very much in the world of *Belshazzar's Feast* (1931) with hints of that cantata's passages of rollicking debauchery and heedless joie-de-vivre in the face of heavenly judgement, and the NZSQ's performance proved an uplifting end to the concert.

The opening bars of Haydn's *String Quartet Op. 20, No. 4* that began the evening immediately established NZSQ's penchant for mellow, blended sonorities and elegant phrasing. The surface sheen on the sound detracted to an extent from the classical grittiness of the music. I sensed little *zingarese* in the third movement and, overall, the contrasting expressive points of one of Haydn's more deeply serious quartets were somewhat evened out.

Among Shostakovich's fifteen string quartets, *No. 2 in A Major* is one of those half-dozen-or-so that I am most familiar with and which I listen to most often. And, while it was the work on the programme that I was most eagerly anticipating, the performance didn't quite live up to expectations. Although I was glad of the opportunity to hear it performed live for the first time, and while I admired NZSQ's committed and involved performance, in the end it was the Walton quartet that emerged as this concert's most welcome revelation.

The New Zealand String Quartet is possibly the most regular ensemble to feature in the Christopher's Classics series. I know that the group was a favourite of Christopher Marshall who died in April, so it was appropriate that NZSQ dedicated this concert to him, and reminded us all of how much we owe to a man who has enriched our lives with his support of New Zealand musicians for twenty-seven years. Long may the series continue under the guidance of the dedicated organisers whose loyalty and commitment Christopher inspired.