

## Les Bons Vivants

Christopher's Classics - at The Piano, Christchurch - 7 October 2021

Amandine Guerin & Cathy Irons (violins), Mark Menzies (viola), Tomas Hurnik (cello), Helen Webby (harp), Anthony Ferner (flute), David McGregor (clarinet)

Reviewed by Tony Ryan

**Les Bons Vivants** last appeared in a Christopher's Classics concert almost exactly two years ago when I remember wishing that they'd managed to include Ravel's *Introduction and Allegro for Harp, Flute, Clarinet and String Quartet*. That would have required an additional violinist, and a clarinet instead of the 2019 programme's oboe. Tonight, with that slight change of personnel, my wish was granted in a truly magical performance in which all seven players rose to every inventive twist and turn of Ravel's imagination. While the wind players added beautifully-phrased tonal richness to the work's opulent melodies and fluttered through its diaphanous textures, and the strings brought myriad subtle textural variety to the music's endlessly colourful timbres, it was the harp that added an extraordinary array of virtuosity and shimmering incandescence to the performance.

I have always thought of Ravel's *Introduction and Allegro* as more of a harp concerto than a chamber work in which all the players are equals, and tonight Helen Webby certainly dominated our attention and brought a true soloist's perspective to the piece. The brief harp cadenzas sparkled in their variety of timbres, but Webby also blended sensitively with the other instruments when required, always adding something special to a work which should be heard in concert more often.

Perhaps it's the work's unusual combination of instruments that has prevented me from ever previously encountering it in a live performance, and it might have been the only item on the programme that employed all seven musicians if Les Bons Vivants and Christopher's Classics hadn't commissioned Christchurch composer Pieta Hextall to write something for the same scoring. Her *The Poetics of Water* ended the first part of tonight's concert, just as Ravel's work ended the second.

Hextall's textures are predominantly sparser than Ravel's intertwining, almost Rousseau-like, forest of colours, shadows, and bursts of glistening light, but she demonstrates a very broad palette of her own colours, textures and rhythmic variety. Inspiration for both music and title comes from a sequence of poems by John Allison, readings of which (on this occasion from the poet himself) are integrated with the music. The first musical sounds represent the onomatopoeic nature of the sounds of rain which the composer then uses to develop an expressive soundscape that reflects the poem's deeper meaning. This first movement of three was my favourite on a first hearing, with each instrument's individual timbre used successfully in creating a wide range of effects. Rhythmic juxtapositions on the wind instruments contrasted engagingly with a wide variety of articulation on the strings, with the harp blending subtly in the textures despite its very dominant visual impact.

In other movements, Hextall's fondness for lower wind sounds (alto flute and bass clarinet) added further expressive colours to her imaginative exploration of the poems.

Tonight was the world première of *The Poetics of Water* and, although there is much to enjoy and engage on a first hearing, it's certainly a work that will benefit from repeated listening. I did wonder if the music could stand alone, without the support of the interspersed reading of the poems, although they did help to focus our understanding on this first performance, even if Allison's rather soft-grained voice doesn't project easily into the auditorium - I was glad to be sitting near the front.

Tonight's programme opened with a work by another New Zealand woman composer. Dorothea Franchi's 1947 *Suite for clarinet, viola and harp* was a delightful and appealing appetiser demonstrating the clear influence of the, then still living, Vaughan Williams, with its English folk song references that somehow brought some of Thomas Hardy's descriptive rural scenes to mind.

The sheer Frenchness of André Caplet's *Conte Fantastique* for harp and string quartet which followed, immediately struck me for its timbral similarities to the Ravel work that was to end tonight's concert. Although a more angular and volatile piece, it was very reminiscent in its harmonies and colours of the chamber music of Ravel, Debussy, Françaix and others. The work was inspired by a rather ghoulish poem by Edgar Allan Poe which, in turn, inspired tonight's performers to enter with masks (of the masked ball type, as opposed to the audience's covid variety) - an excellent idea as a mood-setter for the music itself.

The familiarity of Mozart's great *Clarinet Quintet* proved an ideal contrast to the more impressionist works that surrounded it, and also served to highlight the energy, virtuosity and involvement of tonight's performers. If not all of them quite demonstrated the intensely open and physical commitment of viola player Mark Menzies, they all brought a sense of personality and vitality to their performances, a quality that is, alas, too often missing from music-making. In the Mozart, clarinettist David McGregor in particular, brought a welcome show of spectacle and thrill to the soloistic nature of his part.