

Christopher's Classics 2021 – Argyle Trio

The Piano, Christchurch – 28 September 2021

Reviewed by Tony Ryan

The Argyle Trio's programme featured three well-known masterpieces and, although this concert, delayed from 2 September, originally listed three French works, only the Ravel *Trio* remained for tonight's performance. However, the two Beethoven trios that replaced Saint-Saëns and Debussy were no less welcome, nor was Michael Houston, replacing Melbourne pianist Laurence Matheson.

In the event, all three works brought music-making of tonal beauty, precision, refinement and an easy spontaneity that suggested long familiarity with this music on the part of all three musicians.

Beethoven's *Piano Trio Op. 1, No. 1* was the first of a group of works that the composer deemed suitable for publication as his introductory calling card to the world. The programme notes tonight tell us that the first two movements evoke the spirit of Mozart, while the third and fourth movements give us more of a sense of Beethoven's originality and adventurousness. In this performance the Argyle Trio kept the lid firmly on any hint of Beethoven's youthful waywardness, so that classical refinement kept any sense of drama or provocativeness more in check than I find ideal in this music.

Both string players – Wilma Smith, violin and Matthias Balzat, cello – and pianist, demonstrated an exceptional perfection of ensemble, although I sometimes felt that Michael Houston took too much of a back seat, almost accompanying the strings rather than taking part in the give-and-take, especially in the livelier sections of the *Finale*.

That sense of containment, of keeping the reins on any overt expression, was also applied to Beethoven's great *Archduke Trio* which ended the programme. Somehow tranquillity and refinement seemed to be prioritised over projecting the work's inherent, almost passionate expressiveness, with the phrasing again controlled in a very 'classical' way. The almost fifteen-minute opening *Allegro moderato* had all the beauty and elegance anyone could wish for but, for me, this work's internal drama wasn't fully enough communicated. 'Elegance' was also the byword that I'd apply to the *Scherzo*, overshadowing the movement's humour and playfulness. Even if the stylish phrasing and articulation of all three players was notably impressive, contrasts of dynamics were underplayed; there was almost a sense of the musicians playing for themselves rather than for tonight's one hundred (socially distanced) listeners. The auditorium of The Piano has an ideal combination of spaciousness and intimacy for chamber music, but it still requires the performers to communicate with more forthright projection than I felt we heard in this concert.

The Argyle Trio's style of music-making was much more suited to the *Archduke Trio's Andante cantabile* third movement. In tonight's performance I had a greater sense of this movement's beauty and expression than I've ever had before, particularly in the concluding *Poco più adagio*. Here the players projected an inner, heartfelt emotion that I found exceptionally moving. Matthias Balzat, in particular, allowed himself a degree of expressive abandon that brought to mind the only previous occasion that I'd heard him, over four years ago, playing Shostakovich in the national Concerto Competition in a performance of rare charisma.

The final movement of the *Archduke* returned, once more, to classical elegance, missing a degree of the effervescent joyousness that this music ideally needs.

Earlier in the programme Ravel's gorgeous *Piano Trio* exhibited all the hallmarks of this ensemble – elegance, refinement, tonal beauty, virtuosity and polish; and it's a work which benefits from all those attributes. Enjoyable and captivating though this performance was, I missed the mystery and sparkle that NZTrio brought to the same work in a Christopher's Classics concert almost exactly a year ago.