

Vieux Amis. Justine Cormack (violin), James Bush ('cello) and Sarah Watkins (piano). 12 August, The Piano. Reviewed by Patrick Shepherd.

As the concert's title suggests, these were old friends reuniting, and not just socially but for a feast of stunning music in the 26th season of Christopher's Classics. It would have been quite different had one of the original performers not been trapped in Sydney following the recent Covid outbreak, necessitating a rapid rethink, but the end result was a thought-provoking collection of music that weaved together many common threads and ideas through widely differing composer voices. That the players all have friendships that go back years likely added to the musical cohesion, each understanding how the other works and revelling in being together again during these strange times. Needless to say, these are three performers at the top of their game; putting them together on the same stage, one is tempted to say that the whole was more than equal to the sum of its parts.

The programme comprised works by Pärt, Bach and Shostakovich, each work relating in some way to its neighbours, and the whole package all intelligently contextualised by informative programme notes and Justine Cormack's commentary. The motto for the Christopher's Classics concert series is that, "The busiest lives deserve beautiful music," and I mention this because it so typified how I felt during the first half. Sarah Watkins' account of Pärt's ethereal *Für Alina* provided the ideal mental diuretic for the end of a working day, and to follow that with Bach, then the same pairing again, was just sublime and I loved every minute. With each of the Pärt works moving seamlessly into the two Bach pieces – insightful programming which created internal relationships between the works – that sense of space and clarity was maintained. In Bach's *Viola da Gamba Sonata in D*, James Bush's 'cello playing was immaculate and he and Watkins ensured the elegant lines were well-defined throughout. The pathos of the third movement was well done through the building and release of tension within the phrases. The virtuosity inherent in both *Allegros* was handled deftly by both players, maintaining the busy with consummate ease.

Continuing the theme of connectedness, Pärt's *Mozart-Adagio* is the equivalent of a deconstructed dessert, all the elements familiar but dissected in such a way that details are explored further, finding new textures and sonorities along the way. The trio got the balance spot on and I particularly enjoyed how Cormack and Bush judged the weighting of the heavy chords.

Concluding the first half, Bach's *Violin Sonata in E* saw Cormack taking the reins but again an interesting decision by the trio to have Bush play the continuo part, not intruding but rather providing an extra colour above which the violin carries the melody and embellishment. The convention of the time was to do precisely that and I enjoyed that they did it here. It also made sense given that the third movement is a passacaglia. Interesting that this repeated bass line feature also provided a further link to the second half. Cormack's rhapsodic playing captured the almost stream-of-consciousness quality of the opening *Adagio* and then proved very agile in the ensuing *Allegro*. The trio certainly brought out all the emotional qualities of the third movement, and the final *Allegro* set a cracking pace to finish.

If the first half was all about poise, restraint and grace, then what a contrast in the second with Shostakovich's *Prelude and Fugue in E minor*, followed by the powerful and somewhat enigmatic *Piano Trio no. 2 in E minor*. Both works have the shadow of the Soviet regime hovering in the background (as do all of the composer's works, any shred of humour barely covering the darkness beneath) and both make good use of musical conventions that have come before, cementing that connection with the Pärt earlier in the concert.

Watkins totally nailed the *Prelude and Fugue*. I loved her approach to the Bach and she brought that directness of communication straight across to Shostakovich's meandering prelude that drifted from light to shade, before easing into the fugue. Here Watkins drew the threads together skilfully and built the texture up to a powerful conclusion. There was austerity but also fire, something absolutely Shostakovich.

The *Piano Trio* started where that left off with a fugue, the two strings providing a delicate counterweight to the solemn chorale texture in the piano. The pizzicato work by the strings later on was similarly well done.

The manicness of the *Allegro con brio* was accurately described in the programme and was done brilliantly, utterly aggressive and a flurry of notes, with dramatic surges as well as the ever-present irony in the more playful passages. The passacaglia structure reappeared again in the sombre *Largo* and the trio ensured this was a quite different beast this time around. Watkins' opening monolithic chords were excellent and Cormack's sorrowful playing was sustained and intense, both string players making good use of the Jewish idioms in the writing. The finale was uncompromising and direct, with unrelenting pressure, whether in the quiet passages or in the raw outpourings of feeling. This was a thrilling ride but Shostakovich constantly switches tack and the way the trio handled the dismantling of this potent material was perfect to bring it to its surprisingly subdued conclusion.

Of course, we weren't left wondering – the trio cleansed our palette with a short Bach trio sonata movement. A perfect end to a perfect evening.