

Christopher's Classics 2021 – Serenity Thurlow and Diedre Irons

The Piano, Christchurch – 29 April 2021

Reviewed by Tony Ryan

I wonder if others in tonight's audience found this programme of three profoundly serious major works for viola and piano unusually demanding?

I'm not deeply knowledgeable about viola repertoire, but I wonder if Brahms' two songs for mezzo-soprano, viola and piano might have made an appealing companion to the same composer's *F minor Sonata*; or maybe the viola version of Schubert's wonderful *Arpeggione Sonata* could have lightened the mood a little.

The most familiar piece on tonight's programme was certainly Brahms' great *Sonata Op. 120 No. 1*, so different in its expression in Brahms' own viola version compared to its original clarinet conception. I've always found this sonata's first movement a little difficult to assimilate, but Serenity Thurlow's beautiful tone quality, along with some finely shaped phrasing, brought its expressive substance fully to life. And this was the hallmark of Thurlow's playing throughout the evening. Together with pianist, Diedre Irons, the music-making had a tangible sense of partnership and rapport that demonstrated spontaneity, thoughtfulness and vitality at every turn.

In recent years we have become used to musicians talking to us about their personal connection with the music that they are playing, but tonight Serenity Thurlow, playing her entire programme from memory, let the music speak for itself, injecting everything she had to say into the performances themselves.

The final two movements of the Brahms sonata brought an awareness of a certain degree of restraint on the violist's part which was fully matched by Diedre Irons. In the past I have enjoyed Irons' ability to play with inspired abandon, depending on the musicians with whom she is working, but here she supported and matched all the subtlety and expressive restraint of her partner; the mark of a truly sensitive and responsive artist.

That partnership was evident right from the start of the concert in Hindemith's youthful and approachable *Sonata*. Even as a twenty-four-year-old, Hindemith avoids any sense of heart-on-sleeve emotionalism in this work. As I've often found with this composer's later masterpieces, his music reveals deeper and more enduring expressive character with repeated hearings. In this performance I enjoyed passing moments of melodic and harmonic invention in all three interconnected parts of the work, and I look forward to discovering more of its secrets now that I've saved it to my 'favourites' on Tidal (my current music streaming service).

Since tonight's programme was announced for the 2021 season of Christopher's Classics, I've listened to Shostakovich's *Sonata for Viola and Piano* several times over the last few months, but for me it has proved to be one of those works that doesn't make its full impact until I'm able to experience a live performance. Shostakovich has long been one of my most favourite composers, but despite many years of regular concert-going, this is one work which has never previously crossed my path in a live performance. In the event, the earlier sections of this piece remain rather elusive, but, in the second and third movements, there emerged a clear and familiar sense of Shostakovich's highly original and personal style.

Like several of Shostakovich's last works, especially his *Symphony No. 15*, the *Viola Sonata* quotes from other pieces by both Shostakovich himself and other composers. Without reading tonight's printed programme, I thought I heard references to the second movement of Beethoven's *Eroica Symphony*. Later, the programme revealed that it was the *Moonlight Sonata* but, actually, the dotted rhythmic motif that Shostakovich used is the same in both. The programme also mentions quotes

from the composer's own opera, *The Gamblers*, and there are sections that also reminded me strongly of the final movement of his *Piano Trio No. 2*, written thirty years earlier.

It was in this final piece that Serenity Thurlow and Diedre Irons truly managed to bring a rather austere and esoteric creation to life. The commitment to and belief in this music, as well as the other works on the programme, was never in doubt. Once again, Christopher's Classics has broadened our experience with imaginative programming and artists of the very highest calibre.