

Christopher's Classics 2021 - Te Koki Trio

Martin Riseley (Violin), Inbal Megiddo (Cello), Jian Liu (Piano)

The Piano, Christchurch - 6 May 2021

Reviewed by Tony Ryan

When we listen to music, we tend to find ourselves responding to and evaluating the performers rather than passing judgement on the music itself, especially when that music is by well-established and long respected composers. However, with Bartók's *Violin Sonata No. 1*, passing judgement on the music was certainly a preoccupation among tonight's audience. Comments which reached my ears after the performance included:

"Well, that was tough going wasn't it"

"I won't be lining up for the Bartók again any time soon"

"At the start, I really wondered what was going on"

"It seemed to be full of primal screams"

For a work that's already 100 years old, I wonder if it's time to call it quits, even if some of the world's foremost violinists staunchly support this sonata's value and effectiveness. And tonight's programme notes admit that this sonata is one of the composer's most challenging pieces - technically for the players and expressively for the audience. Even among Bartók's most austere middle-period works, this sonata is unsurpassed in its disparate components and disorienting harmonies.

The programme notes also tell the touching story of Bartók's tearful response to Menuhin's performance, telling him that "usually composers are not played with such understanding until well after their death". But such an idea is a twentieth century myth that belies the huge understanding and appreciation awarded to most of the great, and many of the not-so-great, composers of the past in their own lifetimes. Bartók himself was also the recipient of considerable appreciation and admiration in his own lifetime, especially for his later concertos and orchestral works.

Anyway, without further weighing the pros and cons of the music itself, there's no doubt about the commitment and mastery of tonight's performers. Martin Riseley and Jian Liu clearly have the full measure of the technical and musical demands of this work and, if Riseley's more energetic and physically demonstrative playing contrasted with Liu's seemingly easy and fluidly natural virtuosity, that only served to emphasise the very different nature of the composer's violin and piano writing, where neither of the two parts ever shared a dialogue of agreement. Each of the instruments seemed to respond in quite separate improvisatory ways to one another, even if both players worked together with notable unity of ensemble.

After the Bartók, the opening minutes of Kodály's *Duo for Cello and Violin* came almost as "light relief" (another audience-member utterance) until it, too, delved into deep personal struggles with identity and autonomy. Anyone who's visited Budapest, a city divided by the Danube and with a history of foreign domination and colonisation, will understand just how important artistic assertions of cultural identity are. Such endeavours to establish an artistic individuality are manifested in both Bartók's and Kodály's (and, earlier, even Liszt's) lifelong search for and use of Hungarian folksong in their works. From time-to-time there are fleeting hints, in Kodály's *Duo*, of more familiar pieces such as *Háry János* or the *Peacock Variations* but, like his compatriot, Kodály's piece is a far more deeply personal and anguished response to yet another consequence of wartime on his country.

In this work, Martin Riseley was partnered by cellist Inbal Megiddo and, again their commitment and projection of its expressive content music was one of total belief and understanding, even if, like the Bartók, it required a degree of determined resolve from the listeners.

It was at the start of the Kodály *Duo* that I immediately became aware of the very open-hearted and lively tone quality of Inbal Megiddo's Fiorini cello - vibrant and assertive, and rich and dark without any notable warmth. Megiddo exploited these qualities to the full, both here and in the Brahms *Trio in B Major* which followed. The timbre of her instrument was so distinctive that, to me, it sounded very little different even in the several muted passages in the music; a factor which prevented it from blending easily with Martin Riseley's more focused and centred tonal palette.

After the challenges of the first part of the programme, the opening, luxurious romanticism of Brahms' masterpiece came as a welcome palate-cleanser. The glorious opening melody of the first movement was as uplifting as anyone could wish for in the accomplished hands of these three musicians. And their unified response to the whole work brought sun-filled and optimistic relief from the intensity and anguish of the first part of the programme.

That's not to say the music was less deeply felt or the playing less committed, but the visionary and affecting expression of Brahms' over-arching structural logic and imaginative harmonic and melodic writing sent us out into a cold night with a gratifying and heart-warming aftertaste.