

Tennant-Austin Duo – James Tennant (violoncello) and Katherine Austin (piano). 27 August, The Piano. Reviewed by Patrick Shepherd.

As the lifeblood slowly starts to trickle back into our cultural scene, the proclamation on the programme that, “The busiest lives deserve beautiful music,” had even more meaning for a city starved of live music for nearly six months. In the strange times that we find ourselves, this concert was like pouring water onto the parched earth. James Tennant and Katherine Austin were the ideal tonic we all needed to reconnect to the music we love so much, even if we were all socially distancing, seated well apart. It was also a fitting acknowledgement to the years of generous sponsorship that Christopher and Jilly Marshall have given to the Arts, helping chamber music thrive in the region. The Duo’s rendition of the third movement of Rachmaninov’s *Cello Sonata* as an encore was a moving and heartfelt tribute to two people who have been so passionate and magnanimous in their support in bringing top players to play for us.

The programme was a delight, all linked with Austin’s lively commentary, but Tennant chipped in on occasion, too. Like this engaging pair of fine musicians, Beethoven’s *Cello Sonata no.3 in A major* is more of an equal partnership – certainly more so than his earlier offerings – and as the threads unwound from the simple opening melodic statement the Duo worked hard at maintaining those equal voices. I loved how they tackled Beethoven’s quirky rhythmic stresses, delicate without labouring the point but then breaking out with sudden flourishes, and Austin’s fine filigree in the ornamentation here was spot on. It all came together in the sustained opening of the third movement, Tennant bringing an airy simplicity which soon revved up into the bristling quick finish. Austin was careful to ensure that Beethoven’s sometimes heavily-scored bass notes never encroached on the cello line. The pair made sure that this never rested, the relentless drive and energy pushing it on, each player getting plenty of opportunities to relish the expressive rhapsodic bridges that link the sections. It is worthy of mention that for both this and the later Chopin, Tennant played flawlessly entirely from memory.

Call me biased but I was always going to be hanging out for John Psathas’ *Halo*. Having not seen him in ages I was sad to hear the backstory of this work (the decline and death of his mother) but so delighted to hear what was a profound piece of writing. The first movement (*Red Halo*) had strong meditative elements, heightened by electronic augmentation and the players created a wonderfully warm sense of space, while always keeping that sense of pulse somewhere in the mix, that trademark that pervades much of Psathas’ work. Tennant made the most of the sonorous cello line in the second movement (*Stacia*) while Austin provided the minimalist rhythmic framework, that rippling ostinato helping create so many subtle textures that I found myself not discriminating between the two players at all. Of course, no Psathas work would be complete without the intense busy that he lives his life by, and the third movement (*Angelus*) was all of that and more. The Duo never let up in this emotionally-charged and exciting piece, one of the most glorious effects coming with Tennant shimmering away on *tremolandi* while Austin provided a backdrop of dissonant

chords. The Duo brought the whole thing to a powerful and chaotic climax but the mesmeric aftermath was a thing of real beauty and resolution.

Occupying the second half, Chopin's painfully autobiographical *Cello Sonata in G minor* just kept raising the bar. While the cello certainly has plenty to do, it is the piano that provides the fulcrum for the work, yet Austin made sure that, again, the partnership was an equal one, handling the arabesques and curlicues (Chopin, I daresay unable to resist the temptation to allow himself the chance to shine) with aplomb while never shining an undue shadow over Tennant. In the slow movement the Duo provided an excellent contrast between the *scherzo* and more expansive *Allegro con brio*, always with a keen ear for the darker colours to come through. Rather like the Beethoven, the third movement – a simple melodic exposition with the directness of one of the composer's nocturnes or preludes – was notable for superfine and sensitive playing and I scrambled to get my ideas down towards the end as I had simply gone off into a daydream, momentarily forgetting I had a job to do! Maintaining their focus and stamina, the Duo delivered a stunningly good final *Allegro*, the technical demands coming thick and fast but dispatched with the ease and brilliance that shone through in what was a first class evening.