

Christopher's Classics 2021 - Trio Élan

Donald Armstrong - Violin; Simon Brew - Saxophone; Sarah Watkins - Piano

The Piano, Christchurch - 8 April 2021

Reviewed by Tony Ryan

This opening concert of the 2021 season of Christopher's Classics proved a vibrant and uplifting start to the series.

Although the saxophone is still primarily associated with jazz, its inclusion in 'classical' music is certainly not unusual. It can be found in operas by Massenet and Puccini, among others, and in numerous orchestral works from Bizet to Rachmaninov, Shostakovich and beyond. Debussy wrote a very effective concertato work for the instrument, and the chamber music repertoire for saxophone is already vast. However, the available choice of works for tonight's combination of saxophone, violin and piano is certainly limited and, dare I say, still awaits the vindication of a true masterwork in the way that Brahms' *Horn Trio* validated the horn-violin-piano blend.

Tonight's selection of music relied on two reasonably substantial works written specially for this combination of instruments, along with four shorter pieces arranged from differently scored originals and the inclusion of Debussy's *Sonata for Violin and Piano* to round out the evening. But it all made for a beautifully designed programme in which the enjoyment of all three players was so infectious, technically brilliant and physically communicative, that the audience could hardly fail to share in their delight.

Apart from Debussy's wonderfully evocative *Violin Sonata*, played with stylish flair, atmosphere and tangible rapport from Donald Armstrong and Sarah Watkins, there was nothing on the programme that I'd previously heard.

The concert began with American composer Russell Peterson's *Trio for Alto Saxophone, Violin and Piano*. The two outer movements oozed rhythmic drive, energy and virtuosity, which Trio Élan attacked with such consummate technical mastery that they even had skills in reserve to enhance the music with expressive exuberance and not a little humour. The central *Adagio* provided ideal contrast with plenty of textural variety and a constantly evolving expressive flow. Part way through this movement I couldn't help being reminded of the final section of Respighi's *Pines Near a Catacomb* movement from *The Pines of Rome* as Sarah Watkins introduced a similarly ominous-sounding chordal motif. But, whether intentional or subconscious on the composer's part, such resonances serve to enhance the richness of our musical experience. And if Peterson's trio was the evening's real highlight, it set us up for a sequence of similarly enjoyable works.

Twenty-three-year-old Wellington composer Peter Liley's *Deux Images* (Hmm, - is English or Te Reo not sufficiently evocative? Or is it just that Debussy provided a benchmark title?) was adapted by substituting violin for flute for this performance. These two short movements engaged us with their deceptive simplicity and genuine craftsmanship. Their brevity ensured that they didn't outstay their welcome, and the musicians' commitment ensured their effectiveness. The moto perpetuo first piece, *Small Scurrying*, ended with a fascinating visual effect as the music's 'fade-out' left pianist Sarah Watkins' fingers fluttering noiselessly on the keys for a few second before the performance actually stopped. The word 'image', after all, whether English or French, implies a visual element; something we often miss in the context of recorded, aural-only, performances and something, it occurs to me, that pre-twentieth century composers never *image*-ined!

Tonight's concert featured three New Zealand pieces, with the remaining two by Gareth Farr, both of which were also very short. *Meditation*, adapted for saxophone and piano from its viola original, is a gently expressive and melodic piece with nothing in the way of harmonic or rhythmic surprise, clearly designed as an unchallenging and attractive miniature. And ending this very appealing concert, Farr's second piece, *Tango, Un Verano de Passion*, was brilliantly arranged for Trio Élan by Keith Moss using Farr's attractive original material in a way that made the very most of each of the three instruments (well, four, if you count Simon Brew's change to tenor saxophone, to wonderfully seductive effect, part way through). Brew introduced the piece as having something of the tango's popular "red rose" imagery in its expression, unlike Piazzolla's more deeply soulful tango, *Otoño Porteño*, that preceded it.

But this second part of tonight's programme began with the other of the two works that were originally scored for these instruments. Algerian-born Marc Eychenne's *Cantilène et Danse* began with a gorgeously nostalgic melody for muted violin and had, as the programme note stated, "an unmistakably French, 'everyday' sound – somewhat like Poulenc". For me, it was also the same French sound that influenced Gershwin, who, in turn, influenced Poulenc. *Cantilène* had clear suggestions of the Gershwin of *Porgy and Bess*, while the lively *Danse* had more than a little of *An American in Paris* in its harmonic and rhythmic arsenal, particularly the street atmosphere of crowds and car horns, easily suggested by the timbres of the saxophone. Again, such resonances enhance the experiences we derive from music, and if such influences can contribute towards the blurring of borders that are such a problem in politics and economics, then music is playing its part in widening our tolerance and understanding, particularly in performances of such vitality and charisma as we were given by Trio Élan tonight.