

Christopher's Classics – Wilma and Friends – at The Piano, Christchurch – 7 March 2019

Reviewed by Tony Ryan

I confess that, on paper, this programme didn't really excite me. But tonight at The Piano, the first of this year's Christopher's Classics chamber music concerts proved to be a superb and compelling start to the series.

However, although the first work on the programme might have been written by one of the two or three greatest composers in history, it was certainly the least effective piece on the programme.

Beethoven – *Kakadu Variations* – Op. 121a

I've never encountered Beethoven's *Kakadu Variations* before even though several piano trio ensembles have recorded it, no doubt for the sake of completeness along with the composer's better-known *Piano Trios*. The work probably dates from around 1803, although it's no match for some of the genuine masterpieces that Beethoven had already written by this time. There's some evidence that the piece was revised in 1816, and possibly even again later, but it didn't strike me as having much to recommend it except for the fact that it's by Beethoven. The rather serious sounding introduction doesn't possess the depth that it seemed to be attempting to convey, but there is certainly some light-hearted appeal in the following variations. It struck me as having a considerable element of humour with individual notes and phrases, particularly on the strings, that might have been intended as witty interjections, but they didn't quite hit the mark in tonight's rather dead-pan performance, with no visual corroboration of the music's sense of fun to support the aural evidence.

What the performance did demonstrate, though, was the superb musicianship, and integration of ensemble among the three musicians on stage. Throughout the evening Wilma Smith (violin), Anna Pokorny (cello) and Ian Munro (piano) performed with such unity of spirit and individuality of personality, that everything else on the programme emerged with exceptional character and delight.

Ian Munro – Piano Trio No. 1 – *Tales from Old Russia*

Next was a performance of the pianist's own composition, commissioned by Christopher Marshall himself and premiered back in 2008 in Wellington. And what a delight the three movements of *Tales from Old Russia* proved to be. The composer introduced the work, sounding almost apologetic that he was "no modernist". But as soon as the music got underway its originality and individuality of voice was very evident. Although the influence of such Russian connections as Shostakovich and Prokofiev were sometimes quite noticeable, especially in the final movement, the music's structural cohesion, harmonic variety and sense of story-telling enabled all three movements to maintain our interest and engagement for the work's entire twenty-five minute duration.

Perhaps the first movement's material was a little over-extended, but the final movement brought a real feeling of consistent inspiration. Titled *Death and the Soldier*, the opening march-rhythm was foot-tapping in its appeal, and the many 'sound effects', which included string players tapping and slapping parts of the body of their instruments, the pianist knocking of the closed piano lid, and various bowing effects such as *col legno* behind the string instruments' bridges, were all integrated into the music's expressiveness without any hint of gimmickry. And then, a quick transition brought us into the most gorgeous waltz episode. I couldn't wait to get home to see if I could find a recording of the work – and "yes" there it was on the composer's website. But I'd love to hear the recording of last night's performance; the one at <https://ianmunro.wordpress.com/biog-composer/chamber/> doesn't convey quite the same heart-lifting lilt, maybe because of the rather too up-close recorded sound. It's not often I go to a concert these days and encounter something new that so totally captivates me, but last night's Christopher's Classics concert will, for me, certainly remain a red-letter day for this engaging work. I've been playing that last movement over and over as I write this review.

Brahms – *Piano Trio in C minor* – Op. 101

The level of engagement and charisma remained throughout the second half of the programme. Wilma Smith and Friends played Brahms's third *Piano Trio* with a real authoritative feel for the work's idiom and expressive depth. It's a piece that I've long been familiar with, but this was one of those performances that brings a work newly to life in a way that makes it seem all the greater. In the first movement the players projected such unanimity of expressive understanding that the contrasts and development of the material seemed new-minted in the freshness of its

invention. I was suddenly aware of similarities of texture and tonal qualities that reminded me of the composer's great *Double Concerto for Violin and Cello* which he wrote the following year. It made me wonder if the idea for the concerto might have been inspired by the creation of this *Piano Trio*.

The central movements were equally captivating in this very special performance and the final *Allegro Molto* had a sense of abandon and relaxed virtuosity that brought a deservedly enthusiastic response from the audience.

Françaix – *Piano Trio in D Major*

Dating from 1986, exactly one hundred years after the Brahms Trio, Françaix's *D Major Trio* proved another welcome surprise. In preparation for the concert I listened, as I always try to do for unfamiliar works, to a variety of performances available from various internet sources. It seemed attractive enough, if not something I'd necessarily go out of my way to hear. But, again, Wilma Smith and Friends brought such a freshness and sense of delight to their playing, that the music came alive and engaged the audience fully, even after the glories of the preceding work.

The piece itself is full of quirky interplay among the three instruments with some irresistible jazz-inflected elements in the final movement.

So, quite a special programme in a week of special musical events in Christchurch as the nearby Town Hall comes back into action. But The Piano will certainly remain the ideal venue for concerts such as this one.