

## Concert Review – Tauranga Musica

The Argyle Trio – 21 September at Baycourt's Addison Theatre

Music – truly good music – can have the remarkable ability to transport the listener to another time and place. Music, free from distraction, can make us forget momentarily the uncertain times in which we find ourselves. Tuesday's Tauranga Musica sponsored concerts of the Argyle Trio at Baycourt was just such a moment in time. The organisers at Tauranga Musica and Baycourt staff worked overtime to ensure the integrity of the performance while still managing to adhere to all Alert Level 2 guidelines, providing a refreshing musical oasis in the seeming wilderness of lockdowns.

The Argyle Trio is typically comprised of violinist Wilma Smith, cellist Matthias Balzat, and Australian pianist Laurence Matheson. However, due to travel restrictions at the border, legendary New Zealand pianist Michael Houston made for an extremely satisfactory last minute substitution to the trio.

The trio opened the afternoon concert with Beethoven's *E-Flat Major Trio, Op. 1, No. 1*. Written just 3 years after the death of Mozart, whose influence is unmistakable, Beethoven is clearly eager to expand the form and stamp his own mark on it. The opening *Allegro* movement began with an exceedingly strong and balanced introduction revealing the exquisite blend of the three musicians giving listeners an immediate taste of what glorious music lay ahead. Throughout the movement, even in the moments of the most extreme tenderness, the trio maintained a superb sense of ensemble. The *Adagio* began most delicately by Houston and continued on to reveal some perfectly sumptuous phrasing by Balzat. This movement featured some of the finest and best balanced pianissimo passages in the whole trio. Beethoven's *Scherzo* is something of a rollicking country dance, complete with the rustic, folksy sounds of bagpipes compliments of Houston on the piano. The final *Presto*, a testing movement for all, featured some rather furious and flawless semi-quaver passages from Houston.

Ravel's *Piano Trio in A Minor* gives much greater scope and opportunity to each player than Beethoven. Written just before the outbreak of the Great War, the trio effectively captured the overall sense of foreboding. The opening movement is something of a dreamscape. With its overarching sense of sadness, there are glimpses of tension and trouble as it searches for solace, but not before the trio reaches an agitated climax of fierce energy. The fuller sound and potential of Ravel's early 20th century trio sound is fully realised in the unmistakable *scherzo* second movement. Ravel's third movement began with a chilling wandering theme introduced most-effectively by Houston who was eventually joined by Balzat and then Smith, each with their own haunting subjects. The trio built to a thrilling and angst-ridden unison climax, after which, one by one, the musicians abandoned each other, but not before Smith and Balzat enjoyed a simple lament together. The final movement begins with immense hope – like clouds retreating to make way for the sun. Following some rather unrelenting trill passages for Smith and Balzat, the work moved to an energetic and animated climax of Rachmaninoffian proportions before coming to an almost optimistic ending.

The trio chose a different Beethoven trio to compliment the Ravel trio in their evening concert, deciding upon the famous *B-Flat Major Trio* (known sometimes as the *Archduke*). A brilliant example of Beethoven's second period, the *Archduke* differs in many ways from his earlier more classical trio. In this work, the Argyle Trio achieved such perfect playing and superb musicianship the likes of which is

rarely heard. After an appropriately stately introduction by Houston in the first movement, one by one the strings made their entrances. Balzat introduced the animated theme of the *Scherzo* which was quickly taken over by Smith before being joined by Houston who accompanied their pizzicati. After a fugue which never quite makes it off the ground, there was a fantastic and stirring glimpse of a Viennese waltz. The tender and delicate *Andante* perhaps features not only one of the most sublime moments in Beethoven's chamber music output, but also featured some of the most divine moments in the evening's concert. The final charming *Allegro* introduces an uncharacteristically childish theme by Beethoven which led into a high energy *Presto* with some truly impressive unison playing by the Argyle strings, not to be outdone by Houston's own impressive and glorious contribution to end the Archduke most satisfactorily.

Perhaps now, more than ever, we were in need of this concert. The fact that Tauranga Musica, Baycourt, and the Argyle Trio were all able to overcome a variety of obstacles to be able to offer the public a concert of this caliber and quality right now is to their credit. Mention must also be made of the tremendously generous support of the Tauranga Musica sponsors whose kindness and passion for chamber music ensured the success of this concert.