

## Tauranga Musica Concert Review

Chris Greenslade, piano

4 July, 2021

A small, but by no means unappreciative, Tauranga Musica audience braved Sunday night's biting winter chill to enjoy an evening of Romantic and Impressionistic piano music in the Baycourt Exhibition Space. New Zealand pianist, Chris Greenslade delivered a well-rounded programme of piano works. The first half featured pieces by Dame Gillian Whitehead, Debussy, Schubert, and Rachmaninoff, while the second half was dominated by two contrasting yet stirring works by the colossus of German piano repertoire – Johannes Brahms.

To open, Greenslade selected two complimentary impressionistic preludes. *Arapatiki* by Whitehead is fabulously atmospheric and somewhat haunting. It vividly paints a scene of the Dunedin mud flats and captures the spirit and energy of any number of sea and bird life to be found there. The unsettled feeling of the work, which truly explores the breadth and width of the instrument both harmonically and dynamically, reflects the ever-shifting and unpredictable tidal waters. Debussy's *Footprints in the Snow* (his 6<sup>th</sup> Prelude from Book I), was an inspired partner to the Whitehead. While slightly more grounded harmonically – which is to be expected from an earlier work – it's sparceness and subject matter seemed apropos to Aotearoa's current wintery scenscape. While both these works are "impressions", the challenge of painting these scenes effectively for an audience comes down to the creativity, imagination, and skill of each individual musician. Here, Greenslade excelled in his expressiveness, demonstrating an extremely deep understanding of the sounds of the scenery he wanted to invoked from the instrument; painting, but in sound.

Greenslade's interpretation of Schubert's *F Minor Impromptu* was a masterclass in navigating and exploiting the complexities of the Schubertian sound. His touch, unwaveringly delicate and tender throughout, displayed an intimate knowledge of Schubert's complex voicing, the importance of meticulously balancing those voices, and the unique relationship that Schubert sees between major and minor dialogue. Greenslade's phrases sang from the Baycourt Steinway. Here is a musician who understands and cares deeply for Schubert's ever-important melody. Greenslade and Schubert is an undeniable match made in heaven and I found myself longing to hear what Schubert's Leid could sound like in his capable hands.

Rachmaninoff's *Variations on a Theme by Corelli* (the Italian Baroque master of string music) is really a misnomer. This work smashes the mould of the classical understanding of what a Theme and Variations is meant to be. More of an emotional response to Corelli's simple, melancholic tune, the Russian composer wanders far and wide from his chosen subject and makes some rather unexpected harmonic and rhythmic twists and turns - at times almost crossing the border into jazz; resembling Corelli less and less, and more Ellington. Evident from throughout was the enormous amount of time in contemplation Greenslade must have spent in considering the sentiment and individual character behind each variation. While the musician clearly demonstrates the technical skill necessary for Rachmaninoff's moments of ferocity, Greenslade really excelled in the more tender and passionately expressive variations towards the work's end.

Brahms' famous *A Major Intermezzo* opened the recital's second half. It is something of a musical sonnet from a then-aged admirer, and it speaks to his complicated and life-long relationship with Clara Schumann. In his comprehensive programme notes, Greenslade observed that this work "contains some of Brahms' most introspective and tender music". A risky promise from the pianist, Greenslade, however, more than kept his word. Utterly devoted and sympathetic to the aching restrained passions of Brahms, the pianist's interpretation of this musical ode was both exquisite and breathtaking; tangibly evidenced by the audible exhalation from some of the audience only after Greenslade's hands had well and truly come to rest at his sides.

To conclude, and perhaps to contrast with the earlier Rachmaninoff, Greenslade selected the exhausting and unrelenting *Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel*. Composed when he was just 28 years of age, this was a brilliant foil to the preceding Brahms *Intermezzo*. The work clearly demonstrates the young composer's drive, unmatched skill, and sheer supremacy over his art. Brahms' form is rigidly classical and masterfully exploits the full potential and scope of the popular "theme and variations" form. This was an ambitious choice by Greenslade. The toll that such a musical (and physical) tour de force takes on one's concentration and stamina was at times revealed. He nevertheless saw the work through to its thrilling and extremely satisfying fugal ending.

It is embarrassing that more music-lovers didn't have the courage or fortitude to bundle themselves up and head down to (a very cozy and warm) Baycourt for a winter's evening concert. A musician of Greenslade's caliber certainly deserves a full-house. I would brave the colds of Antarctica to hear his Brahms' *Intermezzo* once more. Be sure to mark your calendars for Sunday, 1<sup>st</sup> of August when Tauranga Musica presents, for your benefit, The Trombone Quartet, at Tauranga Park Auditorium.

Chalium Poppy

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