

## Concert Review – Hammers & Horsehair

Presented by Tauranga Musica,

Baycourt Exhibition Space – August 28, 2022

A great deal has been said in the news this past week about one in one hundred year events, although often accompanied by sad scenes of damage and destruction. Here in Tauranga Moana, however, concertgoers experienced a vastly different event - one hundred years in the making. 2022 marks the one hundredth anniversary of the triumphant return to Aotearoa of Blenheim-born soprano Rosina Buckman after she successfully conquered British concert halls and opera houses alike. Upon her arrival back in New Zealand, Buckman set about on a highly-anticipated and ambitious tour of the motu at a time when road conditions and transportation were as unreliable as the weather.

Hammers & Horsehair, a trio of Wellington-based musicians Rowena Simpson (soprano), Douglas Mews (piano), and Robert Ibell (cello) have set out to recreate this famous and iconic tour and on a glorious Sunday afternoon, stopped in Tauranga to delight a Baycourt audience with salon music from a bygone era.

In an exciting and energetic start, the afternoon commenced with a wildly and spirited *Tarantella* by William Squire, featuring Ibell on the cello, ably accompanied with equal enthusiasm by Mews on the piano. Simpson, after a brief and enlightening introduction to the life of Buckman, began with her first set of songs (rather appropriately) with a New Zealand composition, *Waiata Poi* by Alfred Hill – a song brimming with wonderful imagery and character. This was followed by Arne's charming and lovable air, *The Lass with the Delicate Air*. Simpson is singer of fantastic skill and technique. She possesses considerable control of her instrument. Immediately arresting is her clear bell-like tone and sweetly articulated text, which, when combined with her captivating gaze, makes her a consummate communicator with her audience.

Ibell then followed with two character pieces for cello. *Oriente* by Russian composer Cui is, to be fair, a work which has not aged well and presents a decidedly Western opinion or idea as to the "sounds" of the orient. It is, nevertheless a work of tremendous atmosphere. It is abundant in mystery and intrigue; and it is marvellously evocative of its intended time and place. *Guitarre* by German composer, Moszkowski, is equally evocative right from the onset with its unmistakable Spanish influences clearly obvious from the initial pizzicato entrance. This was performed with great virtuosity and bravura by Ibell who, although casting a calm and serene character on stage, is clearly capable of playing with wonderful passion and sensitivity.

Other highlights from concert's first half included a return to the stage by Simpson to sing two more songs of immense charm and beauty. Spross's *Will o'the Wisp*, the acrobatic accompaniment to which was effortlessly dispatched by Mews; and Rimsky-Korsakov's *The Rose Enslaves the Nightingale*, a song full of atmosphere and emotion captured well in Simpson's delivery. Ibell's charming performance of Dvorak's famous *Humoresque*, was received with much warmth and welcome by the audience. Before concluding, Mews delivered a stirring and inspired performance of Schubert's *Ab Impromptu*, navigating the tell-tale cascading theme with an almost child's play-like ease and building the work to an immensely satisfying climax.

To conclude the first half, the trio performed a dramatic Ave Maria composed by Buckman's original English touring accompanist, Percy Kahn. Originally written for the great tenor of the day, Caruso, the work here was undoubtedly just as glorious in the capable hands of these three Wellingtonians.

As a nod to Buckman's success on the operatic stage, the second half of the concert opened rather appropriately with Butterfly's famous aria, '*One Fine Day*' by Puccini. Here, Simpson beautifully captured all the hopes, dreams, and aspirations of the naive Cio-Cio-San as she eagerly and faithfully awaits the imminent arrival of her Pinkerton. Mews followed this rather appropriately with Brahms' tempestuous Bb *Intermezzo* which seemed to brood effectively.

Ibell returned to the stage and performed two popular salon pieces of the 1920s, Saint-Saens' famous *Swan* from the *Carnival of the Animals* (perhaps the only serious piece in this silly collection) and Sibelius' *Valse Triste*. Ibell's swan moved with tremendous grace and stoic elegance through the room, while Mews' paddling-like accompaniment provided just the perfect momentum below the surface. The cellist went on to deliver a dramatic performance of the Sibelius waltz, the melancholic nature of which built to a terrifying and dizzying climax before being answered by the three knocks of death at the door, contained in Mews' simple yet shattering three-chord concluding cadence.

Simpson returned and delighted the audience once again with her interpretations of Montague Phillips' *Butterfly Wings*, the sad moral to which is perhaps not to let one's eyes go shopping for one's heart; and O'Connor Morris' arrangement of the timeless *Londonderry Air* which, although of its time, suited the programming of this recital so sublimely. Simpson then crossed the Irish Sea to Scotland and, in keeping with her momentary theme of folk songs, presented the most heartwarming rendering of *Annie Laurie*, the cello obbligato to which has been beautifully crafted by Mews himself.

The concert was drawn to an upbeat and lighthearted conclusion with a rollicking arrangement of Arditi's Italian song, *Il Bacio (The Kiss)* which provided Simpson one final moment to demonstrate not only her versatility as a soprano, but also her gifts as an engaging communicator, capable of holding her audience's attention in the palm of her hand.

Chalium Poppy