

Concert Review
NZ Chamber Soloists
Saturday, November 9, Baycourt X Space

Tauranga Musica's 2024 concert season ended with a bang on Saturday with a magnificent concert featuring The NZ Chamber Soloists. This powerhouse ensemble consists of Lara Hall (violin), James Tennant (cello), and Katherine Austin (piano). For this concert, they were joined by one-time member of the group, Dmitri Atanasov who, with Hall, alternated between viola and violin.

Their programme, entitled *Echoes Across Time: Piano Quartets of Passion and Contrast*, consisted of just three works: Mozart's *Quartet in Eb Major (K. 493)*, Brahms' *Quartet in C Minor (Op. 60)*, and New Zealand composer Anthony Ritchie's *Oppositions for Piano Quartets (Op. 116)*.

The concert opened with the *Mozart Quartet in Eb* - a work that should never have been written. In 1785, Mozart received a commission from a publisher to compose three quartets, but the order was promptly cancelled after the bad press concerning the first one - in G Minor. While Mozart's talents weren't in question, the publisher got cold feet after critical reviews declared the first quartet was too challenging for players and fearing nobody would purchase the remaining two quartets that had yet to be published. But even though the order had been cancelled, Mozart composed this, his second quartet, anyway.

In her opening remarks, Austin promised a work that was both exuberant and exciting - and the NZ Soloists did not disappoint. From the first bars, the remarkable communication and ensembleship of the players was evident. The sensitivity and expressiveness of all the players captured perfectly the elegance and grace of the Mozart soundscape. Austin's star shone brightly throughout her numerous solo passages. The second movement was introduced by a breathtaking pianissimo passage, also by Austin. The third movement - quintessentially Mozart in flavour - featured some truly riveting virtuosic playing, again by Austin. One couldn't help but think this slightly unbalanced work more closely resembled a chamber piano concerto than a quartet. Nevertheless, the ensemble delivered on their initial promise and their obvious joy in playing this work was palpable and infectious. Together, The NZ Chamber Soloists make us forever grateful that Mozart ignored his overly-cautious publisher.

The programme's central work was Ritchie's *Oppositions for Piano Quartet* and for this work Atanasov and Hall switched instruments. The detailed programme notes provided explained "...in musical terms, the piano is pitted against the strings, while musical themes seem to jostle for supremacy." This rang true and is an apt description of this single-movement work. Ritchie's music is undeniably complicated and fundamentally complex. It is rhythmically and harmonically challenging for not only the performers but also the listeners. The NZ Soloists, however performed with consummate skill, accuracy and even flair, capturing succinctly the spirit of this clever piece.

The third and final work on the programme was Brahms' *Quartet in C Minor* - a work which cannot be fully understood outside the context of Robert Schumann's recent death around the time of composition, and Brahms' hopelessly complicated relationship with his widow, Clara. This challenging work was originally written in C# Minor - the key that represented for Brahms the suicidal unrequited lover. He later revisited the work and transposed it to C Minor - the key of heroic struggle (used with great effect by Beethoven). Indeed, the melodramatic Brahms wrote to his publisher, "On the cover you must have a picture, namely a head with a pistol to it. Now you can form some conception of the music!"

The two-note "Clara" theme permeates much of the first movement; the brooding and tumultuous nature of which was superbly captured by the ensemble of players. For a moment, Brahms' clouds of agony seemed to part for a beautifully romantic theme introduced first by Austin. This would build throughout with heroic determination, stretching every player to breaking point until culminating in one Brahms' most exquisite climaxes. The second *Scherzo* movement felt more like a dance but still the ensemble managed to maintain the overarching angst that infiltrates the work. The final chord's resolution to the major foreshadowed the optimism inherent in the *Andante* movement still to come. Tennant introduced the agonisingly beautiful theme first, before it was shared amongst the players. This was perhaps the finest moment of the afternoon - indulgently expressive and shamelessly perfect! New Zealand chamber music at its very finest and in the hands

of just the right people. The final *Allegro*, introduced first by Atanasov, saw a return of the tormented suffering themes from the opening movement along with visions of Brahms and his pistol.

The NZ Chamber Soloists gave two well-deserved bows and thus quite fittingly brought the curtain down of Tauranga Musica's 2024 concert season. A tremendous outpouring of thanks and appreciation must go to the organisers of these concerts who undoubtedly work tirelessly to adorn Tauranga stages with good quality music. Patrons are encouraged to keep a close eye on their website for information regarding next year's season which is sure to delight and thrill us all for another year.

Chalium Poppy
Tauranga, 2024