

Concert Review
Elouan Quartet with Bridget Douglas
Baycourt X Space
Sunday 28th June

Local music-lovers were feted to a captivating afternoon in Tauranga Musica's most recent chamber music offering which featured the Elouan String Quartet (Anna van der Zee, violin; Jessica Oddie, violin; Alexander McFarlane, viola; and Ken Ichinose, cello) with guest flautist, Bridget Douglas.

Their concert, *Folk Tales and Folk Tunes*, offered just a little something for everyone and included traditional works from Mozart to Piazzolla; but also included works by New Zealand born, Ken Wilson, and Australia's much-celebrated Elena Kats-Chernin.

The concert opened with Kats-Chernin's 2021 chamber arrangement of her larger 2015 symphonic work, *Night and Now* - a composition that is heavily influenced by the composer's childhood in the former USSR. The piece uses the expansive sonic range of the flute to depict a mixture of Russian fairytales, forest picnics, and early memories of food scarcity.

The first movement, *Solemn*, has an eerie and haunting atmosphere about it which was captured beautifully by Douglas on flute and Ichinose on cello. This was at times accentuated by fantastically ominous tremolos of the violins and viola. The movement soon settled into a mellow thing and featured some rather luscious string writing, exquisitely executed and always perfectly balanced by the Elouan Quartet. The movement was peppered with a few surprising tempi changes.

The second movement, *Allegro moderato e motto ritmico*, featured a subject first introduced by Douglas of truly athletic proportions, but of which she made easy work. It was soon shared by each of the instruments before settling into a playful and fun movement featuring some refreshing rhythmic surprises.

The third and final movement, *Rondo*, was introduced first by Douglas. The free-from nature of her opening solo showcased her undeniable mastery of her instrument. Both colourful and highly expressive, it demonstrated the wide range of sounds available to a virtuosic flautist of Douglas' calibre. Following the long introduction, the work became something of an energetic chase introduced first by the strings which always employed measured restraint so as not to overpower the flute - the true hero of the work.

After a lengthy and well-deserved applause, the musicians returned to the stage to switch direction; performing Mozart's *Flute Quartet in D Major, K. 285*. With great ease and to much delight of the audience, this work captured so sublimely the very essence of Mozart's chamber music soundscape. Grace and elegance abounded for the entirety of the first movement and really just highlighted the ease at which Douglas can move with ease from one contrasting style to another.

The second movement featured a rather enchanting melody by Douglas which was accompanied by precision pizzicati from her string counterparts - both forte and the most exquisite piano.

The third and final movement encapsulated all the happiness, optimism, and vitality of the 21 year old Austrian who had his whole life ahead of him.

The ensemble chose to begin the second half of their program with New Zealand-born Ken Wilson's 1965 composition, *Introduction, Theme and Variations for Ab Piccolo and String Quartet*. The appearance of an Ab piccolo on any concert stage is a rare thing, and this very special performance was all the more remarkable in that Douglas, through a rather illustrious provenance, had traced the instrument upon which she was to perform back to the very instrument that had been used in the work's premiere in 1969.

The work was just as fresh as it must have been in 1969 and featured a series of fun and creative variations each with a unique character and mood that were all magnificently displayed through the expert skill and talent of the musicians. The whole thing built to a rather fantastic, frantic, and utterly satisfying fury in the end.

Perhaps the most challenging work on the programme was the 1928 *Quartet No. 4 in C Major* by Bartok - a work which pushes the limits of not only the individual instrument but also the player with a range of new and wild techniques. One might even suggest that it pushes the ear of the listener.

The first movement was untamed and chaotic and performed with remarkable strength and energy by the Elouan String Quartet. One is immediately struck by how challenging this music must be to layer, yet, the quartet pressed on, unflinching, with considerable confidence and ease.

The second movement was scherzo-like and frantic and yet, the quartet somehow managed to capture an underlying playfulness which shone through in their delivery.

The third movement, very much in Bartok's "night music style", featured a considerable cello solo introduction by Ichinose while the upper strings supported from above with rather unusual chords replete with unexpected harmonies. The solo was eventually taken over by van der Zee on violin while the remaining trio continued in its eerie chordal accompaniment.

The fourth movement was entirely pizzicati and strode along with a gentle intensity. Here, one could easily make out the Eastern European folk melodies that Bartok relied on for his inspiration.

The final movement, with its rather jarring opening, was perhaps the most Eastern European in flavour, and overflowed with energetic and dizzying dance like rhythms while all the time featuring rich counterpoint.

To close, the Elouan Quartet once again invited Douglas to join them for Piazzolla's 1985 piece, *Nightclub 1960* from his larger work, *Histoire du Tango* - a musical journey through the history of tango infused with the composer's telltale use of jazz and classical elements. The work even incorporated hints of bossanova which found their way to Argentina via Brazil. The ensemble played magnificently and captured well the sultry, and at times fiery, passion one might expect to experience in a dark and humid dance hall in Buenos Aires.

What a wonderfully eclectic programme of music, old and new, masterfully curated by an ensemble of New Zealand's very finest chamber musicians. Much thanks go to Tauranga Musica and also Chamber Music New Zealand for bringing such an amazing team of musicians to both entertain and thrill us here in Tauranga.

Chalium Poppy
Mt. Maunganui, 2026