

Sussex Musicians Unitarian Church, January 13th 2024

Again the unexpected and the unfamiliar really swerved. A lively concert too, wholly instrumental as the singer unfortunately had to withdraw and Kevin Allen stepped in with a programme he'd been due to play in April.

We began with Bach's Suite No. 2 in B minor in a reduction by Matyas Seiber for flute and piano, with Karen Rash and Hugh O'Neill. This was a scintillating, airborne rush in all its six (or if you count sections, eight) movements. Curiously Bach's Orchestral Suites were on Building a Library earlier and Nicholas Kenyon and Andrew McGregor discussed the suggestions this suite originally employed an oboe obbligato not flute. Bach wrote so much for the oboe though and it seems odds on this was for the flute. "Leave the poor flautist the badinerie" they declared.

In fact this work as realised by Matyas Seiber (1905-60) really does sound like the finest Flute Sonata Bach wrote, and in some ways, as in some period performance when really pared down, makes the music sound far less fragmented and occasionally full of pomp that they do. In other words this sounds more like masterpiece and Rash floating above O'Neil's condensed orchestral sonorities, realised as a fleet-fingered keyboard suite sonority was both engaging and the most substantial item on the programme.

Shuk Yee Lui is a revelation, playing two very different sol instruments. First playing Schubert's melancholic slowly unwinding Impromptu in C minor D899/1 with a poise and elegance that for the most part wouldn't look too out of place at the Wigmore was the most beguiling item. Able to express sostenuto really well, Lui was able to transpose to rockier passages with expressive eruptions notably well. Not the most serene reading it, had fire and a sense of the way Schubert framed defiance in his C minor D958 Sonata. But some of the resignation of the next A minor work too.

Lui playing Siegfried Fink's (1928-2006) Trommel-Suite on snare drum is one of those moments where you're delighted to hear a piece you'll never hear again. Fascinating in its rhythmic insistence but oppressive only in its lack of real variety, three movement might have proved more engaging. The snare-drum only as a facility of playing softly at the edges, but rhythmically nothing really slow or spectral was attempted. Lui is beyond reproach and I'm delighted with this find and her virtuosity and daring.

Kevin Allen varied his palette too: playing Grieg's Norwegian Peasant Dances Op 72 interspersed with Fartein Valen's (1887-1952) Intermezzo Op36. The latter, a modernist serially-inflected work of 24 slow bars is a stunning evocative work with an albino bird spotted on the west coast of Norway. Hypnotic and memorable, Valen's last piano work is given an equally probing reading here, in Allen's consummate understanding of how serially-inflected music works. It makes you want to hear far more.

The Grieg, not pieces I associate with Allen, were realised with a tang. They're also Grieg's last work for piano, from about 1905. Spikier than we're used to with Grieg, as are his folk arrangements, they too invoke the Hardanger fiddle: rough-edged brilliant, sharp, aphoristic. Especially the No. 6 which ended Allen's singular offering, played as ever with a composer's slant of mastery.

Finally the Jasry Quintet played Boccherini's Quinet in C G443 first movement, and J C Bach's Op 11/1 Quintet also in C, and Eddie Lang's April Kisses arranged by Anna Cooper for this combo.

This quintet (Ross Hume, violin, Yasmin Coleman, Vila, Jane Sebba cello, Sam Christie Flute, Alex Pearson Oboe) came together over lockdown. They're both engaging and pretty unusual. Their repertoire is self-evidently 18th century interspersed with some modern arrangements of other work.

The Boccherini's his best-known quintet and it's hoped they might perform it all. This one went with an attractive lightness of touch, and the J C Bach, also pretty well-known in this genre, also plotted the late-galant-early classical with some radiant touches with flute and oboe, and some attractive solos from the violin.

Coleman's viola got a real chance to shine in the Anne Cooper-arranged Lang, and it's frankly the most seductively-orchestrated and attractive offering of all. Coleman delighted – as again did Hume – in their solo spots. Whilst Sebba didn't enjoy much more than ostinato parts Christie and Pearson enjoyed wind-flecked duets too. Cooper's a locally-based composer and on this evidence I hope the Jasry commission or cajole a lot more arrangements and original commissions from her.

Another unique evening, of revelatory and unfamiliar music. Finally, it's sad to record the death of lifelong member pianist and choral conductor Muriel Hart, who died on December 29th at 99. Active almost to the end, she would have turned 100 on April 11th. I remember Muriel playing Frank Bridge's Three Pieces of 1906 in 2019 at St Nicholas, quite impeccably when she was 95. She first played them in 1938, at 14, and when Bridge was still alive. She's irreplaceable. Her funeral's on January 22nd at 2pm Woodvale Crematorium.

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Unitarian Church, New Road Brighton

<http://www.sussexmusicians.co.uk>

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Next concert February 10th