

**Northern Chords Ensemble**

5-6 May 2023

Bridport Arts Centre, Ilminster Arts Centre, The Dance House, Crewkerne

Benjamin Baker (violin), Jonathan Bloxham (cello) and Daniel Lebhardt (piano) came to Somerset with two traditional giants of the piano trio repertoire, Beethoven’s Opus 1 E-flat Trio, and Mendelssohn’s D minor Trio Op 49. Beethoven and Mendelssohn were considered phenomenal pianists in their day. Beethoven had enormous skills and this trio gave him plenty of scope to impress his Vienna audiences with technical prowess. Forty years later, Mendelssohn received avid applause from a Leipzig audience for his piano performance, played entirely from memory, in Beethoven’s ‘Kreutzer’ Violin Sonata and for his own D minor Trio. Both these works require a technically very accomplished pianist. Not only that, the pianist must be adept at adjusting his skills to a piano not encountered until a short rehearsal before the concert, and not once, but three times in just two days. In Daniel Lebhardt, Benjamin Baker and Jonathan Bloxham had a dependable and safe colleague.

In these trios there are gorgeous slow movements. Beethoven provides us with a lyricism that soothes any ‘savage’ breast’ and almost inevitably Mendelssohn bequeaths us yet another ‘Song without Words’. In this movement the warm and affectionate sound of Benjamin Baker’s violin and Jonathan Bloxham’s cello proved to be a worthy acknowledgement of Mendelssohn’s deeply amorous, sometimes impassioned, melodic contours.

The two Scherzos share fast-speeds, but Beethoven’s energy is devoted to humour and a fast-game of catch, whereas Mendelssohn returns to the fantasy world of his Midsummer’s Night Dream overture. The latter movement was played as an encore at Crewkerne with Jonathan Bloxham challenging his fellow musicians to perform at an even faster tempo. The challenge was accepted and afterwards the audience were once more animated to give these amiable, unruffled, and good-humoured friends another standing ovation. Of course, the secret is to end a concert with a finale as passionate and tumultuous as the Mendelssohn. But the music is still dependent on the quality of execution and Northern Chords Ensemble lifted us straight out of seats by the time the last note had finished.

As if to throw a stone into the middle of a ‘safe lake’ of classical works, and cause a few ripples, the violinist and pianist played Matthew Kaner’s *Five Highland Scenes* (2019) between the two classic works. Through a plethora of harmonics, double-stopping and huge tessitura expertly managed by Benjamin Baker’s violin and chords with much-pedal use to create colourful overtones from the piano, the audience were asked to follow Kaner on his Scottish highland journey through hills, snowbells, tracks with a dusting of snow, its thawing and ending beside a warm cosy fireside. Some listeners were bemused, some appeared to be intrigued, and others spoke of Kaner’s musical journey as an amazing revelation.

On departing there was general agreement from candid members of the audiences that Concerts in the West should once again invite Northern Chords Ensemble to a future season.

Andrew Maddocks 2023