CONCERTS IN THE WEST 30 April to 3 May 2014

AOYAMA DUO

Katherine Bicknell *flute*

Keziah Thomas *harp*

With the endless fascination with Keziah Thomas’s modern harp and the golden Galway sound from Katherine Bicknell’s flute, this recital succeeded on several levels. It hardly mattered that seven out of the nine works were adaptations or arrangements of their original instrumentations because the playing was almost flawless.

The players, in turn, engaged the audience with spirited introductions. By way of Handel’s Harp Concerto in B flat and sonatas by William Alwyn (1972) and Andy Scott (2002), to Bartók and Debussy, they closed with Piazzolla. Alwyn and Scott’s sonatas were the two works specifically written for flute and harp, and each offered challenges to players and audience alike. Whether in the unexpected, vibrant close or ‘watery’ textures of the Alwyn, or the special effects on the harp and the jazz influences in the Scott, there was no doubting the musicians’ strength of communication.

Debussy, who led the way out of the Romantic era, was represented by S*yrinx*, an awe-inspiring work for solo flute with haunting phrases and especially the closing bars using the lowest notes of the flute’s register.

In the arrangement of Bartók’s *Suite Paysanne Hongroise* we admired the composer’s inventive and occasionally disturbing harmonies to a continuous series of fourteen folk songs.

Peter Maxwell Davies’s *Farewell to Stromness* is remarkable for its compelling and simple melody composed within the context of a protest piece against plans to mine for uranium near the composer’s home in Orkney.

Piazzolla has been very much in vogue for several decades. Keziah, in particular, demonstrated her fierce involvement in three of the four movements that make up *Histoire du Tango*, its journey from the roots of the dance in the bordello to the world’s concert halls.

Maybe Katherine’s golden sounds were too perfect for the more raw aspect of some of the music; and the prolonged resonance of Keziah’s harp muddied the waters of what was, originally, crisp writing for the piano.

But for sheer professionalism the Ayoma Duo was exemplary.

ANTHONY PITHER (May 2014)