

CALLUM SMART (violin) and RICHARD UTTLEY (piano)

6-7 October 2023

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

One of the two scheduled performers for this short tour was unfortunately indisposed. In their place, Concerts in the West were able to engage Callum Smart (violin) and Richard Uttley (piano) to play a programme of Mozart, Debussy and Franck sonatas. Perhaps one could say, ‘re-engage’, since it was only fifteen months ago that Smart and Uttley were performing concerts for Concerts in the West. Such was the positive impression that they made in 2022, it was a very welcome return of this duo.

The concert began with one of Mozart’s most mature of violin sonatas, the B-flat major K 454. Here was the fully developed Mozart pen probing the boundaries of structure and the interplay between two instruments. At the first performance in 1784 in the presence of Emperor Joseph II, Mozart, who had the piano part securely in his head but had not had the time to write it out, performed from memory. After a slow *Largo* introduction, the movement develops into a wonderful interlace of ideas and surprises. By the end of just one movement, Callum Smart and Richard Uttley had many of the audience murmuring in pleasure coupled with some self-conscious and spontaneous applause. The *Andante* is full of Mozart’s most velvety and elegant melodies, some with fine, delicate phrases. Callum Smart’s Carlo Bergonzi violin from the 1730s is a superb and responsive instrument. It enabled Callum to coax an evenness and beauty of tone colour right across the pitch spectrum. The last movement, *Allegretto*, is full of *joie de vie* and strong hints of village dance music. True, there are moments of rather darkened grey. But the clouds are soon dispersed, the sun returns, there is much playful humour between the two instruments, and our performers make the most of Mozart’s impish interplay.

If one was looking for a sonata to follow that was contrasting in substance, then Debussy’s A major work of 1917 fulfilled that role admirably. This was written a year before his death, and although a short-ish work, it is packed full of ideas that are superbly handled by the mature Debussy. Richard Uttley gave an apposite and informative verbal introduction to the work. The *Allegro vivo* is full of distinctive colours and textures, some of which are rather reminiscent of traditional Arab music. The *Intermède: Fantasque et leger* is as its title suggests, full of animation and comic-strip characteristics with violin and piano indulging in a Tom and Jerry bedlam. For two musicians of great talent and spirited understanding, this was a gifted opportunity for demonstrating their ability for reciprocity!

The *Finale: très animé* shows no let-up in the helter-skelter action. However, there are spells of quiet reflection verging on a mood of sadness. These contrasts were well handled by the players who instinctively reacted to the needs of each mood.

César Franck wrote his only violin sonata in 1886 as a wedding gift for Eugène Ysaÿe, the outstanding violinist of his time. In his introduction Callum Smart directed our attention to the idea that the music could reflect the various emotional states to be experienced in marriage. The *Allegretto ben moderato* did indeed impart the impressions of tenderness and intensity of young passion, very much conjured up by Callum Smart’s affectionate playing and subsequent warm-hearted sound. The *Allegro* by contrast was full of the surges of outright passion. Dramatic figurations were much to the fore and requiring much-use of the darker lower pitches of each instrument. Richard Uttley fared well with the technical demands of the left-hand figurations and swept his listeners along in his energetic playing. The third movement refashions the thematic material of the first, but now there is the reflective memory in old age of the once-young passion. The piano part caresses the darker and warmer sounds and the violin’s phrases have a reflective and physically sagging acceptance of a mature marriage. The *Allegretto poco mosso* is the perfect partnership of a two-part canon between violin and piano. It has the feeling of a marriage in the autumn of its life. Tonality slips between minor and major, and the piano part finds the resolution of darker passions in higher-pitched and lighter figurations. In the end, the passions of marriage reign triumphant.

Andrew Maddocks 2023