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THE FITZROY QUARTET

3-5 November 2023

Bridport Arts Centre, Ilminster Arts Centre,

The Dance House, Crewkerne, Uplyme Church

The four concerts given by the Fitzroy Quartet were the last in the 18th Season for Concerts in the West. It was a fitting programme of Haydn’s String Quartet No.3 Op 76, sometime nicknamed ‘The Emperor’, Szymanowski’s Quartet No. 2 Op 56 and Debussy’s G minor Quartet.

The venues of this tour gave the Quartet very different acoustic conditions in which to play their programme. Overall, the most favourable and responsive was in Uplyme Church and in which the performers also produced their liveliest and most polished performances.

Matthew Maguire was the very capable and experienced viola player deputising for Emily Pond. The other members of the Fitzroy Quartet are Dan-Iulian Drutac and Jure Smirnov Ostir (violins), and Michael Newman (cello)

The Haydn Quartet published in 1799 clearly demonstrates how writing for the four string instruments had come of age, largely through the compositions of Haydn and Mozart. Following on from the Hungarian folk-styled first movement in which the energetic rhythms challenge the tightness of the ensemble, the diversity and equitability of Haydn’s instrumental writing is plainly to be heard. The variations on the theme gave the members of the Fitzroy technically straightforward opportunities to persuade us of their ability to mesmerise the listeners with suave phrasing, beauty of tone and poise. Throughout, there was evidence of clear understanding and empathy of friends in musical conversation. The clear blue and cheerful sky conjured up by the *Menuetto* gave way to a frenetic hail of notes in the *Presto,* skilfully handled by all four players.

The second Quartet of the Polish composer, Karol Szymanowski (1882-1937) is a work not heard as often as it should be. It was unknown to this reviewer, but who after the fourth hearing was completely won over by its depth and intensity. In large part this conversion was to the credit of the Fitzroy Quartet who projected the technical and musical challenges to the benefit of Szymanowski’s accomplished writing. The opening *Moderato* movement has strong reminiscences of early twentieth century French music, even the *ondes Martenot* slides and vibrato in this movement and the *Scherzando* movement that follows. The *pizzicato* sections of the latter rang a familiar Debussy and Ravel bell.

The programme concluded with Claude Debussy’s only string quartet, a work from 1893. In a self-conscious attempt to move away from the Germanic influences after the disastrous Franco-Prussian War of 1870, French composers made various contributions to forging a distinctive French style of composition. Although there are echoes of an earlier Romantic construction, this quartet has a definite French twist. Debussy’s melodies become shorter and more pithy than previous ages and other influences, such as the Balinese gamelan (the pizzicato passages of the second movement) and the cyclic structure of melodic material – e.g. Franck’s Violin Sonata - make themselves felt. This is a familiar work for any self-respecting string quartet, but with the Fitzroy there was never any hint of ‘familiarity breeding contempt’. The ensemble always felt it was breathing and responding to the finesse of the phrases, especially phrase endings. The overall effect was one of balance between vigorous intention and suavity.

The spoken introductions to the pieces were informative and engaging.

The 2024 Season for Concerts in the West commences in February with a tour by the Perks Ensemble. Full details of that and all other tours can be found on the website: concertsinthewest.org

Andrew Maddocks   
November 2023