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Mēla guitar quartet

6-8 September 2024

Bridport Arts Centre, Ilminster Arts Centre

The Dance House, Crewkerne, St Roch Church, Pendomer

Sometimes a reviewer of concerts is faced with a challenging task by extraordinary performers, when one plaudit after another gives the impression of having possibly been given a princely sum by the musicians as a bribe to write a review that is totally glowing!

The Mēla guitar quartet are a well-established group who have pioneered this medium since 2015 and like so many successful collaborations, it started out with student friends, in this case graduates of the Guildhall School of Music and Drama and the Royal Academy of Music. Although only two of the original quartet, Matthew Robinson and George Tarlton remain, the new line-up includes Michael Butten, an amazingly skilled and energetic performer and Zahrah Hutton, an empathetic player who brings to the quartet both expertise and sensitive musicianship.

Compositions written originally for four guitars are probably very limited in number, but Mēla have in George Tarlton a formidable arranger who can with the undoubted abilities of his fellow players make a convincing alternative to the orchestral originals of overtures by Glinka (*Ruslan and Lyudmila)* and Englebert Humperdinck’s classic *Hansel and Gretel.*

However, the three movement piece *Opals* is an original for four guitars. Written in 1994 by the Australian composer and guitarist Phillip Houghton, *Opals* conveys the many-hued colours that light can bring from these gemstones. In a work, so well written for guitars, Mēla gave us the shimmer of light and the depth of colour that Houghton was seeking to impart.

Another original, *My Clock is Broken* by Laura Snowden, also a guitarist and composer, is stunning. The 2019 piece commissioned by the Mēla quartet explores the idea of trauma, perhaps even the mental breakdown of a horologist driven to despair by a myriad of different clock-sounds. But Snowden’s work is not just a vast array of colours and techniques, it has structural integrity and takes the listener on a sort of ‘Alice in Wonderland’ journey with a very moving coda of acceptance. This was a tour-de-force of ensemble playing and played with utter conviction like much of the programme from memory. There was fine ensemble precision in the arrangements of Debussy’s *Deux Arabesques*. Here, and elsewhere, Matthew Robinson was much in evidence with his sensitive playing and his discernible but respectful and experienced guidance of the performances.

The programme choices and sequence of the pieces is always important. For the listener it can be a rewarding and uplifting journey or merely a disjointed experience. When such an expansive range of styles is on offer, the order of the pieces becomes a crucial factor. Mēla’s selection was spot on, even if the second half felt one item too long.

The members of the quartet took it in turns to introduce the music. By and large this was done well, sharing information and humour with the audience. It helped the audience’s enjoyment and enhanced the relationship and admiration for this remarkable quartet.

Winners of the prestigious Guitar Foundation of America International Ensemble Competition 2023, the quartet has been awarded a multi-concert tour of the USA and Canada in 2025. Their fourth album will be released early next year.

Andrew Maddocks 2024