

Music

Cage, Matisse and the contemporary

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I have come to enjoy both the musical tastes and the high level of performance presented by the Equinox Trio made up of Tricia Dawn Williams on piano, Tatjana Chircop on violin and Lino Pirotta on clarinet.

Some six months ago I had reviewed a performance of Maltese contemporary music which I had thoroughly enjoyed and therefore was looking forward to the concert at the St James Cavalier music room on December 3 entitled 'Cowell to Cage; American contemporary music'.

What struck me as odd was that only three of the eight composers performed were still alive and hence contemporary. I find that the artistic meaning of the word 'contemporary' is becoming very misused, not only in music but in other artistic disciplines too.

A contemporary work of art of whatever type is merely something that has been created by a living artist; any other meaning added is nothing but a misleading distortion. Contemporary art, contemporary theatre, contemporary poetry, contemporary literature and contemporary music are products of today.

If one begins to opine on the modernness and avant-garde qualities of a work to describe it as contemporary, that is where the trouble starts. For example; should one paint a picture in the style of Matisse or Bonnard, one would still be contemporary but painting 'in the style of'.

Similarly, should one be inspired by the pictures of Matisse and Bonnard and create something interpretatively unique out of that inspiration, then the work would, all the same, be contemporary but also be 'a tribute to Matisse and Bonnard'. It is our innate obsession with labelling that causes such confusion.

Back to the Equinox and their concert of American music: I cannot help but start off with a work by that enfant terrible John Cage who, because he died in 1992, is no longer a contemporary but a modern.

In a *Landscape* for piano solo is one of the loveliest works I know by Cage as it resembles a dreamy

misty watercolour landscape reminiscent of the most evocative of Debussy preludes. Williams did full justice to this delicate but intense tone-poem as it rose in swathes of deft Chinese brushstrokes dissolving into nothingness like a helium balloon disappearing into the atmosphere.

The Charles Ives *largo* for clarinet trio was another lovely piece that set the evening going and showed how intensively rehearsed and well thought out the evening's programme was.

I loved the clarinet part of this composition; Pirotta performed very expressively and warmly - something that pervades his playing even in the prickliest and most abstract moments, which is something that stood him in

"The Three Irish Legends by Henry Cowell showed up Williams' pianistic mastery to the full"

good stead during the Camilleri dirge which was included in the programme possibly because it was composed as a lament for the victims of 9/11.

One would imagine that after John Adams's *On the Transmigration of Souls* there would be nothing left to say about this cataclysm that shook the entire world; however, this miniature with its profoundly sad lines that culminate in clusters of apocalyptic piano chords is a spine-chilling reminiscence of a day that changed the story of our lives forever.

I love what I have heard by Andrew Rudin, a true blue contemporary born in 1939. The sonata for violin and piano will be, I am convinced, one day, sooner rather than later, included in the top repertoires in the genre, along with the Cesar Franck and the Brahms 'third'.

Although I sometimes found Chircop's intonation occasionally ever so slightly off the mark, the sonata, on the whole, was a great experience with its syncopated rhythms delineated by pizzicato and staccato interspersed by broad sweeps of lyricism.



The Equinox Ensemble. Photo: Wilfred Camilleri

The Three Irish Legends by Henry Cowell showed up Williams' pianistic mastery to the full with its extraordinary effects of elbows and fists crashing down on the piano, not to mention the unusual pedalling. The colours of these three pieces were nothing short of amazing.

A triumph of interpretation much appreciated by all, as was the Scott McAllister 'X', where we were transported to some southern swamp at night in flights of mysterious lyricisms that contrasted deeply with the more rhythmic percussive elements in this lovely work.

The 82-year-old Ukulele Serenade by Aaron Copeland has lost none of its freshness and shows off all the musical fashions of the period, blues and ragtime, in lovely violinistic declamations while the contemporary *Trio for violin, clarinet and piano* by Paul D. Sayre was a lovely piece that left its most lasting impression with that ever so broad and expressive second and final movement full of tender dialogues between the three instruments.

As Sir Simon Rattle recently declared with regard to contemporary American composition,

what is happening in comparison to Europe is that what we have here is a slow casserole while what is happening in America is a fast stir-fry. I am not entirely sure about this. When a casserole is cooked to perfection the end result, is I am sure, much better than the fastest of stir-fries.

In this concert we had a bit of both and although the concert should have been subtitled 'modern' and not 'contemporary', the judiciousness used to create such a lovely programme should not be quibbled over. No, not at all.

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