

CONCERT REVIEW

HIDDEN CLARINET TREASURES FROM ENGLAND

Recital by Mark Walton (clarinet), David Miller (piano) and Ann Beilby (viola)

Princess Alexandra Hall, Royal Over-Seas House

Sunday 29th June 2014, 3pm

A highly respected and popular figure on the New Zealand and Australian music scene, Mark Walton studied in London and New York in the 1970s. Winner of the Royal Over-Seas League Gold Medal in 1978, he has been resident in Sydney, Australia since 1985. Up till 2006 he was Chair of Performance Outreach and Communications at the Sydney Conservatorium and before that Chair of Woodwind for several years. He now spends his time between his native New Zealand, where he is Musical Director of Christchurch School of Music, and Australia, where he gives workshops for wind players and uses video-conferencing to train young musicians in remote parts of Australia. The proceeds from his three engaging and witty books are being donated to the School of Music in Christchurch which lost its old home in the devastating earthquakes.

The chance to hear Mark Walton exploring the lesser known corners of the English repertoire was a rare treat on a Sunday afternoon. A hall full of Antipodean followers, including his family doctor from Coningsby, and a host of English supporters greeted this Australian master musician. He began aptly with the suave and laid back jazzy *Cadenza* by Sid Phillips who used to play clarinet at the Ritz, a stone's throw away from Over-Seas House and followed on with Paul Harvey's *Five Figments*, a suite written with Finzi on the composer's mind. This ranged from jolly flights of scalic fancy and heroic tunes in numbers one, three and five to a slower reflective melody in number two. The contemplative elegy in number four had me thinking about Ralph Vaughan Williams as well as Finzi.

Colin Cowles' *Shallow Dreams* provided another lighthearted romp through REM sleep perhaps reflecting Cowles' expert knowledge of *Tom and Jerry* in this little première. The Australian composer and teacher Alison Beckett is an ex-student of Mark Walton's from Sydney, who emigrated to the UK in 2004 and now lives and works in North London. Her pithy little piece *Instead* was a short exposé of the contrasts between running round like a headless chicken in a modern city and the necessary moments of calm. She captured this in a haunting modal melody most effectively energised with minimalist imitation. Mike Cornick's Sonata

written in 2006 is a cyclical work where the first movement's haunting theme returns in the third. Again lyrical and tonal, this work had a second movement which resembled a Moorish meditation which led to a thoroughly Piazzolla-like tango finale.

At this point in the recital, Mark Walton was then joined by the Australian viola player Ann Beilby for Gordon Jacob's seldom played *Miniature Suite* for clarinet and viola from 1956. What a fine but neglected work this is. It certainly holds listeners' and musicians' attention in the course of the opening fanfare-like movement accompanied by major/minor *pizzicati* in the viola, the soft reflective second movement in which both musicians achieved an ideal balance and ensemble, the lighter third movement with its reflective central section and the Hindemith-like imitative counterpoint of the fourth movement. Jonathan Febland's *Three Miniatures* comprised a rhythmically charged *March*, sleepy atmospheric *Lullaby* and a rumba *Finale*.

Christopher Norton is well known as the composer of the *Microjazz* educational series for Boosey and Hawkes. He was born in Dunedin, NZ and came to the UK in 1977 to study with David Blake and Wilfred Mellers at York University. His portfolio now ranges from educational music and stage musicals, ballets and orchestral music to jingles and signature tunes, popular songs, piano music and hugely popular albums for the gospel market. He has already written several fine pieces for clarinet, but here his Clarinet Sonata received its première. The first movement was light, rhythmic, and colourful with a real feeling of 'chasing its tail'. The second revealed Norton's trademark laid back style and the third was exciting and rhythmic, mostly in 5/8 time with plenty to keep the players busy. Paul Harris's *Swiftly* did exactly what it says on the can - a technically brilliant piece rippling through furious, fast and essentially fun triplets which feels a bit like a brief trip to Oz. This was a technical tour de force which Mark Walton and David Miller seemed to bring off with not a hair out of place or bead of sweat expended. Bravo!

For clarinetists familiar with his *Sonatina* and *Two Majorcan Pieces*, Joseph Horowitz needs no introduction, but his *Diversion on a Familiar Theme* was effectively the first work he wrote for his friend the clarinetist Gervase de Peyer, his Op 1 written in 1948. Apparently intended for the Queen's visit to the Royal College of Music the composer was tipped off that Her Majesty enjoyed playing Schumann's *Merry Peasant* on the piano as a youngster. Accordingly Horowitz skillfully wove a series of variations around this tune for Her Majesty to catch in

snatches as she was shown round the building. What a fun discovery!

Finally, in this enterprising programme came James Rae's *Two Antipodean Sketches* comprising *Cloudy Bay* (famous for its Sauvignon Blanc of course but soon to be celebrated for this lighthearted melody perhaps), and *Beaten about the Bush* - a tongue in cheek reflection on Mark's successful outback outreach programme for young musicians. This was replete with semiquavers galore, active, fun, very tricky and some wacky references to *Waltzing Matilda* along the way.

This programme was enormous fun, brilliantly presented and played. With a cream tea to follow afterwards, boy had these Ozzie musos earned their tucker. Anyone who manages to play for nigh on an hour and three quarters without a break for the dunny and introduces the composers and works to the audience in such a friendly, relaxed way that we all feel like guests at the Walton household barbe has to be fair dinkum. While his relaxed delivery and technical control seemed to convey 'no worries mate', his sound revealed that his love of the traditional English clarinet sound of the 70s hasn't gone walkabout. His rich, full and dark chalumeau even has a touch of the amber nectar about it. Although Mark's legendary extremely short-sightedness (did his Mum keep him out of the sun too much as a nipper?) kept him shackled to his stand, his delivery was not in the least bit stand-bound. He and pianist David Miller have played together for more than 30 years and boy did this show. The ensemble was exemplary and a gleaming ray of Ozzie sunshine to us tired old clarinet hacks. And even if most of the music was of a rather similar Pommie ilk, his box of budgies ease of delivery, his relaxed and colourful sound with vibrato where appropriate, his consummate technical control and exceptional flawless tuning presented a real object lesson in recital playing to those who were privileged enough to hear it. That Mark Walton seemed not to show the slightest sense of fatigue in such a long and demanding programme will live long in the memory, as will his lyrical delivery and easy rapport with the audience. In the company of such infectious musicians, this was a hugely enjoyable afternoon.

Mark Walton's new double CD with David Miller *Clarinet Hidden Treasures from England* is out now. Thoroughly recommended. The next time Mark is in the UK don't miss him!

Nicholas Cox