

Trio Anima at St Martin-in-the-Fields

A lunchtime concert was given in the church on the 16th of November 09 by this ensemble, which consists of flute, harp and viola, and which has already attracted favourable attention in Paris, London and Aldeburgh since its formation at the Guildhall in October 2006. The programme consisted of three original compositions for this combination, by Debussy, Sir Arnold Bax and Paul Ben-Haim.

Bax's Elegiac Trio of 1916, which began the concert, was so named because of this English composer's sadness at the crushing of the Dublin Easter Rising. The music certainly has undercurrents of sadness, but it is so beautifully crafted and so original in style that it seems effortlessly to transcend its subject and to celebrate Bax's irrepressible love of Ireland and its people. The three musicians, harpist Anneke Hodnett, viola-player Drew Balch and flautist Matthew Featherstone, showed straight away their ability to conjure a subtle atmosphere, which they sustained through the long wistful episode at the centre of the first movement.

Paul Ben-Haim's Chamber Music of 1978, also scored for flute, harp and viola, weaves Palestinian folk-tunes with Middle Eastern harmonies upon a framework of European classical tradition and, as suggested by harpist Anneke in her introductory speech, showed a clear Debussian influence aptly foreshadowing the final work of the concert, the Debussy *Sonate*. The fact that this little-known gem of Debussy's has become increasingly popular in recent years does not diminish the difficulties of performing it, most especially so when performed by heart, as indeed was the entire concert. The clear benefits of this are a closer dialogue between the players and a more direct link between them and the audience. Nothing can be better for making the music speak, as this performance perfectly showed us. Ensemble and balance were spotless, and effortless flow allowed the phrases to be perfectly shaped throughout dozens of speed changes. The moods of the three movements were well-characterized – the nostalgic longings of the first, the fleet-footed whimsical outbursts of the second, the shadowy but well-accentuated grotesqueries and boldly hectic speeds of the third – nothing was neglected or underplayed. St Martin's is a deceptive acoustic, and although it might be fun to liken it to a field it would be both unkind and untrue, so I shall not! It is quite flattering to bass sounds (such as the lower notes of the harp) but somewhat at the expense of treble registers, and I did feel that both the flute and the viola seemed to suffer from a slightly restricted dynamic range, above the stave, in this building. No doubt this kind of problem is something which time and experience will iron out; meanwhile it is clear that this ensemble should have a very distinguished career ahead of them, and I look forward to many further chances of hearing them.

Richard Stagg