



Frith Piano Quartet

Reviews

“The Frith Piano Quartet delivered a programme defined by excellent musicianship, strong ensemble work and fine solo performances which was clearly appreciated by the audience.”

Georgina Coburn, Inverness

“Their powerfully sonorous playing was marked by the utmost precision; I don't think I've ever heard such utterly unanimous pizzicatos.” Mike Wheeler, Derby Press 2008 “The Frith Piano Quartet perfectly captured Fauré’s stylish sublimation of suffering”

Nigel Jarrett, Monmouth

“The superb blend of the strings, the supreme finesse and sparkle with which the piano part was imbued, the luxuriant and sensuous ambiance of the slow movement, the consistently strong, powerful rhythmic presence and, naturally consummate musicianship –all were there.”

Brian Paynes, Westmoreland Gazette

“fireworks from the pianist (Benjamin Frith) in the first movement were matched in spades by Robert Heard(violin), Louise Williams(viola) and Richard Jenkinson(cello), excitement being intense yet controlled.”

Susan Allison, Cockermouth 2008

“The Frith piano quartet played (Schumann’s Quartet) like they’d been playing it all their lives, and made the best possible case for a work which comes close to that crowning achievement, the Octet.”

Susan Allison, Cockermouth

The Frith Quartet captured all the thunder-clouded anxiety of the situation at this Merlin Music event with playing that pushed the piano-violin-viola-cello format almost to breaking point. But they kept their heads, especially in the outer movements, where the turmoil is most pronounced, reserving for the sublime third movement the eloquent expression of love that Brahms found inseparable from his feelings of wretchedness. Faure would never have permitted himself such raw outpourings, even though his Piano Quartet No 1 in C minor is in the same wistful key and composed when love’s course for him, too, was running far from straight. In some of the best music-making of the night, the Frith perfectly captured Faure’s stylish sublimation of suffering, again pointing up a slow movement of sober reflection and regret. Bliss’s music can be a revelation of sorts but the hugely-derivative Piano Quartet in A is not in that category, even when trawled from oblivion. Others did better, and the much-maligned Bliss knew it.

The Frith Quartet, Blake Theatre, Monmouth | South Wales Argus

A Masterly Brahms Piano Quartet Lights Up a Sunday Morning in Cardiff – Seen and Heard International Benjamin Frith (piano), Robert Heard (violin), Louise Williams (viola) Richard Jenkinson (cello). Reardon Smith Theatre, National Museum of Wales, Cardiff Dvořák, Piano Quartet in D, Op.23 Brahms, Piano Quartet No.1 in G minor, Op.25

When Schoenberg explained why he had chosen to orchestrate the First Piano Quartet of Brahms he began by explaining, reasonably enough, that he had done so because he liked the piece very much. He went on to add that “it is always played very badly; the better the pianist, the louder he plays and you hear nothing from the strings. I wanted to hear everything”. I like to think that Schoenberg would have enjoyed the performance of the Brahms quartet given as part of this Sunday morning chamber music concert. Benjamin Frith is a very good pianist, a thoroughly accomplished soloist; but he is also an experienced and ‘diplomatic’ chamber musician, who certainly didn’t play the piano part too loudly; indeed he and his colleagues made it possible to “hear everything”, with the lucid phrasing and well judged instrumental balance that characterised their performance of Brahms’ quartet. Many of the same virtues were also evident in their performance of the other work on the programme, Dvořák’s Piano Quartet in D. Though thoroughly well-made and pleasant, it has to be said that this is not one of Dvořák’s most distinctive or characterful works. Its first movement offers a range of moods and manners, which were nicely articulated by the Frith Quartet, the whole having a well-judged sense of scale and pace to it. In the theme and five variations which make up the andantino second movement the transitions of structure and mood were nicely distinguished, at one moment troubled and reflective at the next singingly optimistic, and the beautiful melodic line of the coda was very attractive. The furious rhythms of the scherzo theme which opens the third movement could have danced a little more insistently, but the allegro agitato material was played with appealing vivacity and purposeful lucidity.

Enjoyable as Dvořák's Quartet (premiered in 1875) is, Brahms's First Piano Quartet (which had been premiered less than fifteen years previously in 1861) is music of a different order and scale. This is one of the great works in the chamber music canon, and it got a performance which brought out most of its qualities. The long first movement embraces triumph and tenderness, though tragic pathos is never very far away (Cobbett, indeed, described the movement as "one of the most original and impressive tragic compositions since the first movement of Beethoven's ninth symphony"). Whether or not one wants to go quite that far, there was much to admire in the way the Frith Quartet elucidated the depth and the range of this music, both in its moments of textual complexity and its moments of austerity. In their playing of the Intermezzo which follows, with its 9/8 rhythms, the tenderness and near-pathetic introspection of the scherzo stood in very effective contrast to the delightful sparkle and elegance of the trio. In the andante third movement, the lyrical theme in E flat was glorious and the march it frames was more jauntily ceremonial than aggressively militaristic in intention. With the return of the lyrical material at the close of the movement, the Quartet brought out the remarkable sheer beauty of Brahms's writing in admirable and convincing fashion. The incipient tragedy of the first movement and the sometimes darkly mysterious nature of the second now left well behind, the closing Rondo alla zingarese was played with enormous panache and infectious fire. It was one of those occasions when being confined in a seat in a concert hall seemed a thoroughly unnatural condition –since it was obvious that one should be up on one's feet and dancing! The sheer excitement of the Frith Quartet's playing of this movement was properly greeted, at its close, with tumultuous applause. But, of course, that excitement was the product of remarkably disciplined playing and of the path we had followed, through the three previous movements, to get there. One of the joys, indeed, of this performance was how well it conveyed a sense of the work's shape as a whole. With a chamber work as good as this, as well played as this, who needs orchestration and orchestras?

Glyn Pursglove

Frith Piano Quartet @ Wigmore Hall, London

This hour-long morning concert by the Frith Piano Quartet featured two works written by youthful composers, sharing the key of B minor and both portents of the promise shown by their authors. Belgian composer Guillaume Lekeu (1870-1894) remains the preserve of chamber music aficionados rather than being a household name, but there is no doubting that his music merits far wider appreciation. Of course, his premature death at the age of twenty-four ensured that the rich melodic gifts failed to reach their full maturity, but the most assured of his works point the way to a composer who wore his heart on his sleeve, which lends his music an appealing honesty. The Piano Quartet of 1893 is one of these works, even though it was left incomplete in two movements by Lekeu and the score was "touched up" by Vincent d'Indy in order to render it performable. The first movement was gripping from its opening statements, the Frith Piano Quartet seizing upon the arresting nature of Lekeu's grand initial tutti gesture which comes across almost as a paragraph begun part way through. The quartet's phrasing was by turns imposing and pliant when needed with Benjamin Frith's piano playing proving a near ideal foil to the exchanges of material brought to exciting and involving reality by the well-matched trio of Robert

Heard, violin, Louise Williams, viola, and Richard Jenkinson, cello. The Frith Piano Quartet created an atmosphere of heady ebullience that was totally at one with the tone and tenor of Lekeu's forthrightly scored music and they crowned the movement with playing of magnificent verve. The succeeding movement provided much in the way of contrast, its mood being darker and more inward looking with the interplay of instrumental voices being held back to suit the more subdued mood. There was a spaciousness to the Friths' articulation of their parts, with the strings often in stark contrast to chords of the piano accompaniment. If a feeling of melancholia had pervaded the movement, the ending provided more of a question mark than a full stop with the cello's slightly accentuated pizzicato final notes which seemed to ask both players and audience which might have followed if only Lekeu had lived to complete the piece. This certainly whetted my desire to hear more Lekeu whenever possible in the concert hall and the Frith Piano Quartet should be congratulated on their sterling advocacy of this unjustly neglected composer. Felix Mendelssohn, on the other hand, needs no introduction or special case to be made for him, yet it is still remarkable how fresh and alive even a piece of juvenilia such as his Piano Quartet no. 3, opus 3, written at the tender age of 16 can be made to sound. So much so that the Friths' playing of the opening movement Allegro molto brought out with ease that this was music that carried the assurance and daring of youth in its every phrase, ranging as it did from moments of serenity to tempest-tossed exuberance, with the turns of tempo being adroitly and sensitively handled. The second movement Andante was possessed of an elegance that owed much to the careful maintenance of an even dynamic range throughout. The third movement was justifiably yearning and questing in its thematic material, with a sense of continual movement and investigation easily captured. Here perhaps at times the violin proved momentarily a dominating element with its hard-edged tone, but in the closing movement the Frith Piano Quartet found unity of purpose and driving impetus to see their interpretation home, taking time along the way to integrate Mendelssohn's delicately dancing passagework for each instrument neatly and pleasingly into the whole.