

CLASSICAL REVIEW: Clare Hammond

“Pianist and artist-in-residence at Queen’s University handles the masters with an ‘unusually judicious approach’”.

Terry Blain for CULTURE NORTHERN IRELAND
on a recital at Queen’s University Belfast, 11 October 2012

Some pianists hammer the instrument into submission, some caress it. Clare Hammond is firmly in the latter category, as her inaugural recital as this year’s artist-in-residence in the School of Creative Arts at Queen’s University clearly demonstrates.

Beethoven’s ‘Appassionata Sonata’ – a piece frequently rendered virtually unlistenable by the clattering pyrotechnics it can unleash in players – benefits particularly from Hammond’s unusually judicious approach. There’s no dashing towards the next climactic eruption in her interpretation, no overloading with angst, no drenching of the music in spurious, excessive emotions. Hammond focuses instead on the broader contours of the musical argument, unravelling the sonata structure of the opening movement with uncommon clarity.

Beethoven’s explosions of temperament, when they come, are all the more startling as a consequence. Hammond undoubtedly has the physical power to encompass fully the swirling technical difficulties of the tempestuous finale, but is again careful not to rush the music into fevered incoherency. In her judicious balancing of the classical and romantic elements in the sonata, and her finely honed musicality of approach, Hammond recalls both Myra Hess and Annie Fischer, great Beethoven pianists of bygone generations.

Scriabin’s ‘Sonata No. 5 in F sharp’ poses interpretive conundrums not dissimilar to the ‘Appassionata’, its sudden lurches between what Hammond terms ‘phrases of inexpressively sensuous languor and of frenetic activity’ making it difficult to hold the single movement together as a coherent listening experience. Hammond manages this balancing out of contending sensibilities with an artless ease, gliding unobtrusively from interludes of heady, perfumed rhapsody to others of cascading hyper-intensity. So often in Scriabin there’s an unwholesome whiff of hothouse decadence: Hammond purifies the air breathed by the music, distilling moments of exquisite, lingering poetry for the listener.

Earlier, in a nod towards her new Queen’s connections, Hammond includes ‘Piani, Latebre’, a work by Piers Hellawell, Professor of Composition at the university. It’s an immediately appealing composition, Hammond’s elegant dispatch of the twinkling note-clusters in the ‘Impromptu’ section underlining how clean her attack is on the keys, how carefully calibrated the decay of sound in her scrupulously voiced chordings.

There’s also a world premiere, a brace of short works by Hillsborough composer and conductor Hamilton Harty, discovered recently among the papers of a woman Harty apparently fell in love with in 1934, during a voyage to Australia. The first, ‘Portrait’, distantly echoes the Elgar of ‘Chanson de Matin’, while the longer ‘Spring Fantasy’ has a Schumann-like turn of phrase and sentiment, with twirls of Chopin filigree in the piano writing. Hammond’s accounts of both pieces are charming.

Shorter works by Szymanowski and Messiaen fill out the programme, which opens with a ruminative account of Handel’s ‘Suite No. 6 in F sharp minor’. It’s a work originally written for harpsichord, and Hammond doesn’t quite manage, on a modern Steinway, to give the trills and decorations of the opening ‘Prélude’ the easy fluency of her playing later in the evening. The concluding ‘Gigue’, though, is full of élan and elasticity.

The abiding impression left by Hammond in this recital is that she’s far from being a self-advertisingly virtuosic player, a strutter of stages on the international piano circuit. Her playing is of an altogether more thoughtful and discerning quality, focused constantly on the music itself, searching out its deeper significances and inner verities.

Perhaps that’s why the Harty Room is loath to let her go on this occasion – she plays two encores (a Handel ‘Air’ and Scriabin’s ‘Étude in C sharp minor’), but the audience seems ready to continue listening. They get another chance when Hammond returns to Queen’s in February 2013 for more workshops in performance and composition, and a lunchtime recital on February 21. Piano-lovers who can get there on the day should certainly be attending.

Also available online at www.culturenorthernireland.org/article/5280/0/1/classical-review-clare-hammond