

## Music

# From folk to funeral chants

Silvio Camilleri reviews Tricia Dawn Williams' solo piano recital at St James Cavalier.

Tricia Dawn Williams' solo piano recital at the Music Room of St James Cavalier took the audience on a journey bordering between abstract idioms and folk tunes; from music celebrating life to other pieces dealing with passing away.

The recital included a selection of 20th-century and contemporary works, most of which Williams performed earlier this month at the Béla Bartók Memorial House in Budapest.

The programme commenced with Pawlu Grech's *Ideograms Book 1*, composed in 1980. Grech is an inquisitive character and both his music and visual art reveal a disposition to analyse elements most people would deem insignificant. He is fascinated with rudimentary particles and investigates how these may relate to a larger metaphysical entirety.

In Grech's paintings this becomes evident with his inquiring into fossils which attest how former earthly creatures have transitioned to a different form of life.

In this piano composition, Grech explores how a basic sound – the introductory note of the work – may be elaborated and re-explored through variations in intensity, duration and assimilation with other sounds.

These concepts were further explored in subsequent works, such as *Ideograms Book 2* (1982) and *Continuous Contrasts* (1984). As the latter title suggests, Grech is also concerned with contrasts he contends are an integral part of Mediterranean culture.

Contrasts and inquisitiveness imbue Grech's works with artistic freedom, even if this is restrained in a sober manner.

Indeed, the score for *Ideograms Book 1* specifies fairly clear directions; at times spelling the duration of particular phrases in seconds.

Williams' meticulous approach when switching between different levels of intensity greatly contributed towards a colourful interpretation of this work. The



Tricia Dawn Williams

pianist highlighted the contrasting sonorities, for instance when one compares her determined rendition of the second movement to the more flowing execution of the fifth, which features various elaborations on an introductory short phrase.

The second composition was Béla Bartók's *Four Dirges*. This relatively early work from 1910 comprises four movements written in the spirit of mourning chants originating in Romania.

Bartók's interest in folk music was not simply limited to collecting melodies or expressing patriotism, but also extended towards exploring the relevance of folkloristic characteristics to contemporary musical idioms.

The *Dirges* evoke a sober haunting atmosphere – perhaps not the style one would expect from a composer of an *enfant terrible* reputation. This gives rise to discussions, given that some interpreters would opt for a 'barbaric' interpretation in line with the composer's perceived notoriety, while others feel they should remain faithful to the actual score directions which often include *dolce*

and *espressivo* passages. I would classify Williams' interpretation as somewhere in between since she offered quite a sparkling rendition without losing the meditative qualities of the work. This was particularly evident in the second movement – *andante* – with its transitions from *dolce* to *poco allargando* and its embellishing *arpeggi*.

The third work by American contemporary composer Scott McAllister was thematically linked to the previous one. A number of McAllister's works are inspired by rock music, notably *Black Dog*, where the reference to the classic Led Zeppelin song is not merely limited to the title. The work *Salt of the Earth, the Sea, and of Me* was composed on purpose for Williams' recent recital at the Béla Bartók Memorial House; for this occasion, McAllister opted for a sober idiom, perhaps more fitting as a tribute to the great composer.

The work owes its name to a poem written by McAllister's grandmother after the death of her son. The composer did not specify any time signature and limited himself to indicating a slow *tempo*.

As the two-section composition progresses, it becomes more introspective. *Ostinatos* serve as the backbone of the second section, over which the composer inserted bursting passages which, in a sense, may be considered as a score for an additional pianist. Williams sounded particularly assertive in the first section, whereas the interpretation of the second was colourful and sensitive right up to the closing desolate phrase.

The recital then progressed on a lighter note, with Bartók's arrangements of three Hungarian folk songs entitled: *I lost my Young Couple*, *Walachian Game* and *My Little Graceful Girl*.

Williams brought out the melodious qualities and relative simplicity reminiscent of folk music and seemed confident in rendering both the exultant aspects in the second song and the more lyrical moments of the third tune.

The last work was *Suite Caféinée* by French contemporary composer Pierre-Adrien Charpy, who has created his own artistic identity by responding to inspirations and influences garnered across different cultures. This 11-movement work changes substantially as dance-like passages with forceful *staccato* rhythms are juxtaposed with more expressive sections. Triplets and *ostinati* characterise a number of movements.

I particularly enjoyed the playful rendering of the third movement – *Ngue* – which is noteworthy for its allusions to an exotic atmosphere, and the final one – *Gbakt*, which brings the work to a frenzy close.

Comparing this rendition of the suite to the previous one given by Williams at Sala Isoard some months ago, I would classify the more recent approach as a bit more confident and jazzy.

The audience's warm response to these interpretations merited an *encore*, where Williams' choice was Béla Bartók's *Go Round, Sweetheart, Go Round*, based on a Hungarian folk tune.