

IRISH HERITAGE: Young Musician Programme

AISLING ENNIS – HARP

Wednesday 17th November 2010 - The Irish Club, Tudor Street, London

Reviewed by Michael O' Sullivan

Irish Heritage held another of their occasional *Young Musician Programme* concerts at the Irish Club Tudor Street EC4 on Wednesday the 17th November. The programme for the evening consisted of a bold and interesting blend of music from Baroque to Modern with a strong Irish emphasis, and all written or arranged for the harp. The recitalist was Aisling Ennis, a young, but already quite well known freelance harpist from Cork. Aisling is currently Cheshire based and travels widely, performing regularly in Ireland and throughout the United Kingdom.

Staging a classical music concert on a cold damp night at a busy central London venue requires special care and attention on the part of the organisers, but Irish Heritage ensured that the performance started right on schedule and proceeded throughout in accordance with the printed programme notes. The Club's atmospheric and versatile Connaught Room, with its attractive period décor and original works by Irish artists was the ideal venue for the occasion.

An interesting and carefully chosen selection of short and fairly well known pieces made up the programme, beginning appropriately with two offerings from Ireland's national composer Turlough O'Carolan. The juxtaposition of two tunes of different tone and colour can result in a particularly satisfying musical genre, and here the elegiac poignancy of *Lord Galway's Lamentation* contrasted very successfully indeed with the more restrained and stately waltz rhythms of *Carolan's Welcome*.

The quintessential O'Carolan reappeared later in the programme with *Eleanor Plunkett* and *Fanny Power*, which together demonstrate his two main musical influences, Irish folk melody and the Italian baroque. O'Carolan's music survives in melody only, so every harpist will necessarily have his or her own 'version', arranged or harmonised accordingly to suit the instrument and the current style of playing. Technical ability, artistry and musical taste, combined with a just respect for the composer's intentions make for satisfactory arrangements. Aisling Ennis met these challenges admirably, her own arrangements of these tunes fully emphasising their high classical qualities while preserving their essential character as dance tunes.

A technically demanding piece, *Etude de Concert*, from the brilliant 19th century Belgian harp virtuoso and composer Felix Godefroid, something of a patron saint to harpists, was delivered with considerable finesse and close attention to detail. This was followed by the beautiful musical poem *Nocturne* by Russian Romantic Glinka, one time student of John Field, whose early Romantic influence can perhaps be felt in this piece.

The harp appears everywhere in Handel's music from operas to oratorios, though a concerto with orchestra for that graceful and decorative instrument was rather unusual for the time. In the *Harp Concerto* Handel's scoring ensures that the solo instrument dominates, making its opening movement a perfect choice for Aisling Ennis to

demonstrate her skill and flair. A charming, if atypical, example of Handel's fondness for the Italianate.

The very finest of Welsh harp music was represented by *Minstrel's Adieu to His Native Land* from the prolific composer and virtuoso performer John Thomas who was harpist to Queen Victoria and held the Welsh bardic title of Chief Musician of Wales.

Inspired by a line from one of Moore's poems, the skilfully arranged 'theme and variations' form of the piece allows the performer to demonstrate a variety of musical techniques thereby exploiting the instrument's full potential. Aisling Ennis managed to employ these compositional techniques to great effect, each of her sequences delicately evoking the beauty, nostalgia and deep sadness so characteristic of Thomas's best music.

Like O'Carolan, the 20th century Irish composer TC Kelly, sought to construct a specifically Irish musical voice out of what he saw as a common European heritage. His two short traditional airs, *I Saw from the Beach* and *The Deer's March*, played here as a set, employ characteristically native themes and rhythms, and in Aisling Ennis's own lively but sensitive arrangements take on a structural format reminiscent of the late Baroque so beloved of O'Carolan. It is promising to see young musicians like Aisling Ennis making TC Kelly's hugely interesting but neglected work known to a wider public.

Gabriel Faure's imaginative and highly accomplished *Impromptu OP 86* must be a positive delight for harpists. Aptly named, since it seems to defy established musical form, it provided Aisling Ennis with the perfect opportunity to demonstrate a wide range of skills and techniques. Arpeggios or broken chords, 'slide' effects, full and imaginative use of the instrument's register were all very skilfully executed indeed and made this piece the highlight of the evening.

For encore we were treated to *Harpicide at Midnight* by Pearl Chertok, 20th century harpist extraordinaire and one time president of the American Harp Society. An interesting and welcome addition to the programme, the demanding little piece demonstrated the composer's technical versatility as well as her penchant for energetic and innovative jazz idioms.

Aisling performed throughout on her own 23 caret gold leaf Italian 'Salvi Minerva' harp. The ultimate in musical craftsmanship, the beauty of its appearance was only matched by its rich, mature and full-bodied tone, making it a real delight to hear. Aisling Ennis's obvious mastery of this instrument coupled with the extensive repertoire at her command will ensure that much more will be heard from her in musical circles in the future. She also very kindly provided a useful and completely unobtrusive commentary to each programme item. We very much look forward to hearing her perform again at future Irish Heritage and other events.

This well publicised event attracted a close to capacity audience, the seating was comfortable and the lighting arrangements perfectly adequate. The acoustics in the Connaught Room were among the best for a venue of its kind, the music delightfully crisp and clear at all times. Congratulations to Irish Heritage for organising this very successful and enjoyable evening and also to the Irish Club for providing the facilities. I very much look forward to further Young Musician events in the near future.