



# Richard Jenkinson & Benjamin Frith

## REVIEWS

The Birmingham Post

“... Worcester Concert Club hosted an amazing recital by cellist Richard Jenkinson and pianist Benjamin Frith, including a breath holding account of the Rachmaninoff Cello Sonata and Ian Venables’ worldstopping Elegy – almost my highlight of the year, this performance of such a passionate and anguished work.

Austro-Hungarian Treats Nairn Community & Arts Centre

The Music Nairn 2018-19 season resumed with a recital by two very old friends of Nairn, cellist Richard Jenkinson and pianist Benjamin Frith. Both men were frequent visitors at Clifton House, both as soloists, duettists and as part of larger ensembles, and have continued this tradition ever since. Their latest performance opened with Schumann's Drei Fantasiestücke, three charming pieces originally composed for clarinet and piano, but which work beautifully on cello and piano. Jenkinson's rhapsodic tone was beautifully complemented by Frith's exquisitely subtle touch in a beautifully detailed account of this passionate music. The stage was set for the Cello Sonata by Ernő Dohnányi, a youthful work composed in 1899 in which this arch-romantic gives full reign to his rich imagination and exceptional piano technique. Although the composer's Hungarian roots are tapped occasionally in this fine work, it is the almost overwhelming flood of Viennese romanticism which is most striking. The cello part is demanding

enough, but the piano part, which the composer wrote for himself to play, is phenomenally challenging, with enormous sonorous chords, surging scales and arpeggios and passages of dazzling complexity. Frith's stunning technique took all this in its stride, while constantly finding the musical line through this demanding work. It is good to see Dohnányi's chamber music begin to be restored to its rightful place in musical history, a process which is long overdue. The second half of the recital opened with the Cello Sonata by another Hungarian, Zoltán Kodály, a work composed less than ten years after the Dohnányi but belonging to a whole new enigmatic sound-world. A beautifully atmospheric Adagio, with singing cello melodies and diaphanously rippling piano figures segues into a more brutalistic Verbunkos or recruiting dance, given a wonderfully spikey and percussive rendition by Frith and Jenkinson. Much less familiar than the same composer's wildly manic opus 8 Sonata for Solo Cello, the subject of Jenkinson's ongoing PhD studies, the present Sonata is a fine piece, again deserving of more attention. Their latest performance opened with Schumann's Drei Fantasiestücke, three charming pieces originally composed for clarinet and piano, but which work beautifully on cello and piano. This cleverly constructed programme culminated in Brahms' iconic opus 38 Sonata, the first of three such works Brahms composed for the combination. The fact that the composer scrapped an Adagio and replaced it with a concluding fugal movement suggests a degree of indecision, but in fact the music has a sense of complete authority, and has become one of the mainstays of the repertoire. Again Frith had drawn the short straw, with Brahms' distinctively flamboyant and rich piano textures sometimes rightly dominating the sometimes rather spare writing for the cello. But particularly in the fugal finale, it was the magical rapport between the two musicians which made their account of this great work both memorable and utterly convincing. Rapturous applause elicited a delightfully apposite encore, which picked up many threads from the preceding works – a transcription for cello and piano by the Hungarian Franz Liszt of the aria O du, mein holder Abendstern from Wagner's Tannhäuser. Benjamin Frith, who had managed to weather a coughing fit in the Kodály and was clearly suffering from a cold, never allowed his affliction to affect a superb performance, and to my mind this was one of the finest of the many Jenkinson Frith Duo recitals I have enjoyed over the years.

Reviewed by: D James Ross

HEARD UK CONCERT REVIEW

Stravinsky, Glazunov, Rachmaninov: Richard Jenkinson (cello), Benjamin Frith (piano).

Reardon Smith Theatre, National Museum, Cardiff

Stravinsky, Suite Italienne (arr. Stravinsky and Piatigorsky) Glazunov, Chant du ménestrel Rachmaninov, Sonata for Piano and cello in G minor, Op.19 Stravinsky, Glazunov, Rachmaninov.

The high point of this interesting recital undoubtedly came with the Jenkinson Frith Duo's performance of Rachmaninov's remarkable sonata, which closed their programme. This was a passionate, but properly disciplined, performance of what is surely one of Rachmaninov's finest works, even if it presents the performers with some problems of instrumental balance. These were largely solved – Benjamin Frith's assertive work at the piano dominated in places, as it should; but elsewhere the common suggestion that this is really a piano sonata with cello accompaniment was put firmly in its place, as Richard Jenkinson's assured and expressive playing was foregrounded to make its full impact.

In the lengthy opening movement, the complexity of which is hinted at by its being marked *Lento Allegro moderato-Moderato*, the judgement of tempo and changes of tempo felt spot on and the contrasts between the movement's slower, sadly pensive moments and its turbulent development section worked well, in a manner which felt organic rather than forced, as it can sometimes seem to be. There was, indeed, a pleasing sense of shape to the reading of this movement, so that the resolute piano chords at its close felt like the capstones of an arch. The *Allegro scherzando* which follows is technically demanding, but no mere showpiece. Here it certainly made musical and emotional sense within the context of the whole work. Still, the heart of the work is surely the third movement (*Andante*), elegiac and melancholy but not self-pitying. The intimacy of the opening theme was well handled by Benjamin Frith and Richard Jenkinson phrased the long, sustained lines on the cello very convincingly; the movement's powerful climax was approached in a manner which had both a kind of unstoppable momentum and a profound naturalness, before the movement ended with its calm conclusion, played with utter gentleness. The last movement had a blazing affirmatory quality, especially in its second theme. The whole made complete emotional and musical sense. The scale and size of Rachmaninov's Sonata were preceded by favourite Glazunov miniature – the five minute *Chant du Ménestrel*. The piece is, in no derogatory sense, slight, but its writing for the cello (here the pianist is definitely cast as accompanist) contains some lovely passages. Richard Jenkinson was a persuasive advocate for this undemonstrative late-romantic music (ably supported by Benjamin Frith), music which allowed one to hear to perfection the beautiful tone of his instrument, made by Giovanni Grancino of Milan around 1692. But both musicians were to be heard more fully 'together', and playing nearer their full capabilities later in the programme – above all in the Rachmaninov. Their performance of this would alone have justified anyone's attendance at this concert.

Glyn Pursglove

Jenkinson-Frith Duo Even Better Second Time Round

by Stan

Stravinsky, Glazunov, Rachmaninov: Richard Jenkinson (cello), Benjamin Frith (piano).

St David's Hall, Cardiff 2.4.2013 Stravinsky: *Suite Italienne* (arr. Stravinsky and Piatigorsky) Rachmaninov: *Sonata for Piano and cello in G minor, Op.19* Glazunov: *Chant du Ménestrel*

Just over two years ago I saw and heard these two performers play the very same programme (see review). The experience was sufficiently enjoyable for me to want to repeat it. Actually, these later performances were better still – more sharply etched with greater rhythmic bite and even more sense of instrumental interplay. Before the performance began, Richard Jenkinson explained that his pianist partner had been unwell and had spent a sleepless night with sickness. However, I am pleased to report that Benjamin Frith's performance showed no ill effects. The cello and piano version of Stravinsky's *Suite Italienne* came about as the result of a whole series of metamorphoses and rewritings. It was Diaghilev, via a letter from Ernest Ansermet to Stravinsky, who prompted the initially reluctant composer to mine the music of Pergolesi (both genuine and spurious) to put together a ballet score, with a *commedia dell'arte* libretto. Stravinsky agreed and his reworking of the Pergolesian materials became the music for the ballet *Pulcinella*, premiered in Paris on May 15 1920. The score contains some 20 items. A suite of 8

items was also produced, in 1922. In 1925 Stravinsky, in collaboration with Paul Kochanski prepared another version *Suite d'après des thèmes, fragments et morceaux de Giambattista Pergolesi* for violin and piano, which contained transcriptions of six pieces from the ballet (*Introduzione -Serenata – Tarantella –Gavotta con due variazioni –Scherzino – Minuetto and Finale*). In the early 1930's Stravinsky worked with Gregor Piatigorsky to produce this *Suite Italienne* for cello and piano (*Introduzione – Serenata – Aria – Tarantella, Minuetto and Finale*). In truth the amount of 'Stravinsky' increased as the process went on (and the proportion of 'Pergolesi' declined. So, for example, the *Aria* in the *Suite Italienne* begins with rhythmic materials far more Russian than Italian, even if one hears something more Italian in (unsurprisingly) the *Tarantella*. What all the music shares is a lively wit and sophistication and a good deal of *joie de vivre*. *Stravinsky: Suite Italienne* (arr. Stravinsky and Piatigorski) To all these qualities and idioms, Frith and Jenkinson responded admirably. The *Serenata* was invested with a sweep of gesture which remained elegant, the interweaving of cello, line and piano accompaniment especially adroit. The Russian inflections at the opening of the *Aria* were forceful without excess or ponderousness and the *Tarantella* and the vivace *Finale* both had real rhythmic bite. The sense of the dance was never far away throughout, making for an inviting and absorbing reading of a valuable piece –in itself and in terms of its place in the development of Stravinsky's 'neoclassical' manner. Rachmaninov's *Sonata* is an altogether heavier work; there is not much dancing here. Its Russianness, one might say its 'Rachmaninovness', has more to do with a journey from darkness to light and to its communication (without explicit musical allusion) of much of the spirit of the Russian Orthodox Church – not least in the richness and weight of instrumental colour and some almost bell-like sonorities (and I don't think it is fanciful to hear affinities with the *Dies Irae* in the opening of the first subject in the first movement. Richard Jenkinson's performance throughout was intense and passionate. His instrument –made by Grancino in Milan around 1692 – was particularly beautiful in its middle and lower range and contributed to the well-balanced sound in which Benjamin Frith resisted any temptation or tendency to let the piano part become excessively dominant. One was impressed, rather by the contrapuntal dialogue of the two instruments in the *Andante*. In the closing *Allegro mosso* the cello was properly dominant, especially in the radiant declaration of the joyous second theme, a thoroughly positive affirmation after the more conflicted first movement. Recent listening to this *Sonata* has made me realise its weight and depth and this performance certainly contributed to my increasing sense of the work's greatness. By way of encore we were treated to the very different 'Russianness' of Glazunov's *Chant du Ménestrel*, romantically tender and nostalgic, more overtly 'nationalistic' and possessed of considerable melodic charm, its brevity and undemanding nature, its relative lack of weight making it a fine 'warm-down' after the rigours of the Rachmaninov, demanding, as it does, much less in the way of concentration or emotional investment for the listener. This was a lunchtime concert full of emotional power and technical accomplishment, a fine hour of Russian chamber music on a Welsh spring day. I shall be happy if I don't have to wait another two years to hear the Jenkinson Frith Duo again.