

Editorial Information

Whangarei Music Society

“The Music of Cole Porter and George Gershwin”

The Jelly Rolls: Ben Wilcock (piano), Daniel Yeabsley (bass), John Rae (drums)

Cole Porter – Night and Day, You’d Be so Nice to Come Home To, Anything Goes, Begin the Beguine, Don’t Fence Me In

George Gershwin – How Long Has This Been Going On, Love for Sale, Embraceable You, The Man I Love, I Got Rhythm, Rhapsody in Blue

Sunday 10 April 2016, 2.00 p.m.

The Old Library Arts Centre, Rust Avenue

Review Text [444 words]

Whangarei Music Society’s 2016 season opened with a programme of music by Cole Porter and George Gershwin – right? Well, as it happens, *wrong!* We heard, not music as penned by those two consummate tune-smiths, but only their melodies – wrapped up as spicily syncopated themes and variations. And, barring the element of improvisation, that’s a rough-and-ready definition of jazz, isn’t it?

Named after the illustrious Mr. Morton, the Jelly Rolls comprised Ben Wilcock (piano), Daniel Yeabsley (bass) and John Rae (drums). They looked like an archetypal “modern jazz ensemble”, but they sounded like anything *but!* There was none of that characteristic “profound” (i.e. incomprehensible) navel-gazing. Neither, for that matter, was there any of that endless, empty note-spinning – technically impressive, but utterly irrelevant – that you all too often get from so many jazz “virtuosi”.

But believe me, this wasn’t for want of the requisite technical credentials – Ben’s flying fingers, always admirably accurate, could twinkle or thunder with the best of them; John (remember The Troubles, here in October 2014?), adept with sticks, brushes and fingers, furnished an unfailing stream of intriguing colour; and Daniel plucked his bass, warm and resonant – *gut strings*, Daniel told us – with such acrobatic agility you’d have thought him a fiddler. The group’s fourth member, Teamwork, also played a blinder!

The Jelly Rolls stuck close to the aforementioned “definition”; they introduced the melody – generally emerging from an atmospheric introduction – in its original form or thereabouts, and subjected it to a stream of highly inventive variations. Moreover, these episodes were not distinct, but artfully blended into a satisfyingly logical, virtually seamless whole. So rarely was the relationship between variation and melody not apparent, that on such occasions I felt sure that *I’d* somehow missed it.

My one and only disappointment came after Ben said, “*Rhapsody in Blue*, but not as you know it.” He was right. Gershwin used at least four distinct melodies. Apparently sticking to the formula, the Jelly Rolls used just one (plus, unless I’m mistaken, a brief snatch of *London Bridge Is Falling Down*), thereby missing a golden opportunity to apotheosize their evening’s work. But, it was as brilliantly done as all the other eleven items, including the adorable encore, an evocative and bravura *Summertime*.

The entire programme brimmed with entertainment of the highest order – thrills, spills, moments of rapt contemplation, wit and humour, huge waves of excitement, and surprises galore. Personal preferences were suspended; by any standards, this was *MUSIC*, beautiful music, wonderfully made music – and the audience loved it! As the song says, “’t ain’t what you do, it’s the way that you do it” – and make no mistake, the Jelly Rolls sure know how to get results!

Paul Serotsky