



[Lunchtime recitals: The Capstone Theatre, Liverpool](#)

Reviewed by [Denis Joe](#) March 2011

One of the best things about lunchtime recitals is that you get to hear pieces that are new to you, and this recital at [The Capstone Theatre](#) did just that. Whilst the music of *Fantasia and Etude No.2* is familiar, performed on the harp they take on a new life.

Elfair Dyer:

Fantaisie on 'Eugene Onegan' P.Tchaikovsky, arranged by Milda Agazarian

Suite for Harp Benjamin Britten

Angelina Warburton:

Impromptu Albert Roussel

Etude No.2 (Fugue from 'Violin Sonata No.1') Bach Grandjany

Impromptu op 86 Gabriel Fauré

Listening to the Fantasie I became aware of the role of glissando and how effective it is in creating a dramatic effect in the music. With an orchestra it is easier to maintain a flow, and so the move from one pitch to another can be taken up by other sections, whereas the soloist has to make that journey in one breath.

For me, my only informed experience of harp music was listening to the music of Turlough O'Carolan played by various Irish harpists, in my younger days. The glissando seemed to be just another 'lovely' technique. But the great Russian harpist, Agazarian, has certainly created a piece that stretches the ability of the soloist. In doing so, she has brought out the intimacy of Tchaikovsky's music that can otherwise be lost in an orchestra.

It seemed a strange yet brave way to open this recital. Elfair Dyer more than met the demands of the piece, and whilst her technique could not be faulted what seemed more pronounced was the passion that she exerted; there were moments when the harp seemed to take on a life of its own and Elfair seemed happy to let that be. I have never really thought of the harp as an instrument capable of conveying any stronger feeling than pleasantness, but this performance has certainly forced me to review that idea.

I was certainly looking forward to Britten's Suite. It is a piece that I was not familiar with, and I never imagined that Britten could capture the essence of his own music in such an instrument. Written as a result of a request from the harpist Osian Ellis, Britten said of the suite: "I feel it is rather 18th century harp writing, but somehow it came out that way." Whilst there is a sense of that, there is also the Britten opera in there, especially towards the closing of the first movement, which has echoes of the 'Sea Interludes' from Peter Grimes. But the real beauty of this piece is the closing movement. Based on a Welsh Hymn (St. Denio), Britten's genius for variations comes through beautifully.

Elfair Dyer displayed a great deal of self-assurance in her choices. It is to her credit that she showed us that the harp is more than just a pleasant instrument for chamber music, but that it can be, in the hands of the right soloist, an instrument capable of outbursts of dramatic passion, equal to the piano or violin.



Angelina Warburton's choices were no less demanding and opening with the Roussel Impromptu was genius. Many dismiss Roussel's music as being a bit twee, which I never quite understand. There was a certain dogmatic approach to his music (perhaps resulting from his love of mathematics), far stricter than Debussy or Ravel, but like them he could not escape the impact of the Exposition Universelle in Paris, in 1889, that brought the arts of French colonies to Europe and impacted on the music of Debussy, Ravel and Roussel. But whereas Debussy romanticised le sauvage noble, Roussel was fascinated by the system of the music, and this comes through strongly in the Impromptu. Though I am familiar with the piece, Angelina's performance demanded I listen to it more intently and it almost presented itself as a new piece of music, as well as showing how important this piece is in Roussel's oeuvre. It is sad that this was Roussel's single composition for the harp, I feel that the instrument highlights the subtleties of gamelan music greater than the piano, for instance.

Marcel Grandjany was one of the greatest composers for the harp and though much of his music for that instrument may not explore the harp to a great extent, his transcriptions shed new light on the harp and helped to extend its repertoire. Many composers have transcribed Bach but very few have done so for the harp. Victoria Drake's transcriptions of the cello suites are, perhaps, the most outstanding achievement in that area.

The harp isn't the first instrument I would think of as suitable for baroque. Baroque music, and especially Bach, can sometimes feel like one note follows the other. Modern transcriptions, such as Stokowski's for orchestra have helped to provide Bach's music with a flow that is more acceptable to our (modern) ears. Unfortunately you can feel that the orchestra is overpowering you and you yearn for a more sedate music. I think the harp does this very well and there is an irony in that the harp's association with early music should help to make another early era's music more accessible. But that is not to suggest that the music is 'dumbed down'. Whatever the instrument, Bach's music carries its great demands. If anything I feel that the harp would expose, more easily, any errors in performance. Miss Warburton's performance of the piece was flawless and said much for her musical abilities that she executed this piece in such a manner.

In a way the Gabriel Fauré piece brought us back to the start of this recital. Whereas Angelina's other two pieces emphasised the technical beauty, this piece carried us back to the dramatic. In fact I think it sounded more operatic than Elfair Dyer's pieces, and the irony is that Fauré is regarded as a flop when it comes to opera. I think this is unfair and was more to do with the theatrical weaknesses. I agree with Aaron Copeland's assessment that Fauré had the ability to reach Wagnerian heights of drama. It is not just obvious in his greatest opera, *Pénélope*, or even his *Requiem*, but is also noticeable in much of his chamber music including this *Impromptu*. It was a powerful performance that I only wished could have lasted longer.

It is a testament to the organisers of these lunchtime recitals that they can provide us with such

outstanding performances as this, and it is a pity that they are not better attended. These recitals will usually provide something that will not be heard on the circuit; that sense of adventure is one of their main attractions. But also these musicians deserve a wider audience. It is not that the audience doesn't exist - go to any classical concert, symphonic or chamber, and there will be at least a couple of hundred people. But greater than that of the 'converted' is that it provides people with the opportunity to enter into a new relationship with music.

Some may be put off by the lack of familiar or the idea that this music is 'difficult'. I would suggest that the thrill is in exploring the unfamiliar, but also I think that the greatest value of these recitals is that they provide the audience with a more intimate view of how a performance comes into existence and, in doing so, expose the 'difficult' myth as meaningless twaddle.

The (usually young) people who perform at these recitals exhibit a dedication for what they are doing. Unlike other areas in today's 'vocation, vocation, vocation' approach to education, the areas that they have entered into do not afford an automatic entrance into the job market, and whilst they may well be 'gifted', to maintain a high standard of musicianship they must engage in drudgery, like the rest of us; playing the same piece over and over (in fact I notice that the [Royal Northern College of Music](#), in Manchester, allow passers-by to see students in practice, as if they are shop window mannequins).

It is not the process that we should find astounding, but the end result. Elfair Dyer and Angelina Warburton gave an outstanding recital, worthy of anything you would see and hear in the concert hall. Their dedication is nothing less than inspiring.