

Queensland Youth Symphony
John Curro AM MBE, conductor
Lisa Gasteen, soprano
QPAC Concert Hall, Brisbane
Saturday May 31, 2014 by Patricia Kelly

WHEN maestro Zubin Mehta conducted the Australian World Orchestra at Sydney Opera House last year, he was in awe of the performance. "Do you realise what you have here?" he asked the audience. The same question must be asked of Queensland Youth Symphony after *Illuminations*, its subscription concert at QPAC Concert Hall, Brisbane, on May 31. Do WE in Queensland realise what treasure we had at that hall?

Later that night as I drifted into sleep, that music and its performance were resounding in the brain, re-playing the music, re-creating the sight of those vibrant, committed young musicians following their extraordinary leader Curro down some of the most challenging and exuberant paths music can take. Orchestral textures were exploding like the mother of all fireworks displays. At other times they were as soothing as sweet balm.

It was a concert like no other, one of most unforgettable musical experiences of my life, and there have been many memorable performances over the years. It was the music, yes. A stunning selection from a far-too neglected Italian master, Ottorino Respighi. But it was also the vitality of the young musicians, some hardly into their teens, their bows flexing furiously, the brass firing brilliant salvos, the whole band in sync with the program, and the moment.

Some of it we have heard before, many times in the case of the mischievous, merry pranks of "Till Eulenspiegel" by Richard Strauss. Some was quite new to many of the audience. When has Respighi's solo vocal cantata // *Tramonto (The Sunset)* been performed in Brisbane? In Australia? Concert programs over the years have seldom strayed far beyond the repertoire from European sites north of the Italian border. Yet here was this package exemplifying Respighi's masterly scripting of orchestral colour and dramatic narrative tension in the setting of a poem by British poet Percy Bysshe Shelley.

And here was soprano Lisa Gasteen, stately and gracious, one of Brisbane's, of Queensland's, of Australia's leading lights of Wagnerian opera, delivering the ebb and flow, the rise and fall of the music, wave after wave of noble lyricism, expansive and pensive in turn. Gasteen's voice soared over the sensuous, undulating lines Respighi created, not competing with inflated and histrionic exercises, merely gliding through the text, calmly through the shades of the twilight of a life lived as "a drop in the deep sea of Love," ultimately to find rest. It was sheer bliss, Gasteen at the peak of her interpretative power in this gentle, understated milieu. The augmented quartet ensemble stayed with her through every nuance, every wave and emotion.

Carl Vine's *Gravity Road* (2013), a commission from QYO, slotted comfortably into the program, not because it imitated the Respighi style, but because it balanced the merry, mischievous pranks of "Till Eulenspiegel" by Richard Strauss, the expansive colours of *Tramonto*, and the volcanic eruptions of Respighi's *Church Windows*, the final of the four images, *St Gregory the Great*, in particular.

Gravity Road played on the drama and jollity of its inspiration from an 1827 railway line, the second built in the United States of America. It began life as a downhill coal carrier from the Pennsylvania mine. It ended as "Gravity Road," reputed to be the world's first roller-coaster that was to delight generations of thrill-seekers paying fifty cents for the precarious ride. Vine's generous spirit and skilful use of orchestral textures brought these elements together in an exciting tone poem incorporating many moods of human experience. Till Eulenspiegel would have relished that ride.

The crowning glory of the evening was Respighi's suite of four orchestral impressions inspired by stained-glass windows in various Italian churches. The first, *The Flight into Egypt*, in Respighi's own words, was an image of a little caravan on a starry night carrying the "Treasure of the World," a chant-like nocturne. The second, *St Michael the Archangel* made big, bold statements befitting this important theological personage through which emphatic brass resounded brilliantly from this section of QYS 2014. Also befitting the subject, *The Matins of St Clare*, kept a low, reflective profile as layers of sound supported the chant floating above.

Ah! *St Gregory the Great* (c. 540-603). Here was a window to make you take notice. The Benedictine monk-become-pope at a time of chaos in Rome and strife in Italy, bringing learned Augustinianism and popular piety to his task of expanding and empowering the Roman Church. The glory days were just beginning. With impeccable artistry, Respighi spun this scene from a hushed chant, the lull before the storm, the calm before the power and glory were to thunder through the centuries of Christendom in all its might.

The young players responded with a glorious outburst of music that was taut, overwhelming and unrelenting to the final throb, matching the ecclesial might reflected and shimmering in the brilliant window display. Perhaps it is a metaphor for a force that saw the rise of the edifice now almost crumbling under the weight of its own inglorious past. Sweet dreams were difficult, but they came at last, in the joy, peace and accomplishment of Brisbane's shining troupe of young players and their leader. Queensland be proud. Be very proud.