

Queensland Youth Symphony
John Curro and Warwick Potter, conductors
QPAC Concert Hall, Brisbane
Saturday August 23, 2014

YET again, John Curro served up a feast of musical morsels with the Queensland Youth Symphony, the orchestra he founded in the mid-1960s and has directed ever since. This third concert in the QYS's 2014 season throbbed and shone with all the brilliant energy evidenced in the two previous performances, confirming initial feelings that this 2014 group is one of the best yet.

The intense application of these young players is a marvel at a time when young people have so many distractions and sometimes disdain for an activity that requires, nay, demands complete commitment and resolve to strive towards the goal.

The program opened with a real buzz, the premiere of *Xenocide* by Samuel Dickenson, Queensland-born and one of the most successful and performed young composers at home and abroad. He has been well-mentored through student years (and is working towards his PhD in composition at The University of Queensland) but there is a singular and imaginative spark of individuality in this composition that augurs well for his future.

Thank heavens I did not read his *Xenocide* program notes until after the event. I would have thought "you've got to be kidding." As it was that was still the reaction to his account of the work's inspiration and fantastic plot. Narrative may have inspired, but it seemed that the power of this music stood on its own merits. Dickenson made no secret of *Xenocide*'s romantic aesthetic origins, a direction he admitted to be exploring and extending in his present compositional phase. He has skipped right around and past modernist trends, atonality, minimalism and such, yet crucially his style almost defies being pinned to any time or place.

QYS players were right up for its challenge, an orchestra that was strong in every section, its gleaming brass and French horns in particular. The hall was brimming with rich musical colours as the opening growl in lower strings against drum roll set an ominous mood ahead of a stealthy gathering of speed and intensity driving and shaping the music into buoyant, engrossing soundscapes. The surge of organic imagery drew you into its depths and its shallows, its peaks, its troughs, skilfully integrated into a coherent, vital whole.

It was a hard act to follow. In contrast to Dickenson's organically expansive work, *Concerto No. 1 for Tuba and Orchestra* by German composer Jörg Duda (born 1968), receiving its Australian premiere, had a more edgy flavour, a discrete arrangement of elements in constant dialogue, at times in oppositional mode. Rarely is the tuba given a solo spot in the concerto repertoire, so this was an extra challenge for Andreas Hofmeir who met the difficulties with a constant delivery of warm tuba tones well balanced against the band.

The timbre of the tuba sat most comfortably with the ensemble in reverie, the lyrical second movement's pastorale-like mood. It made a strong opening statement in the finale, before taking a commentator's role against the orchestra's rhythmic progress. There was a much more compatible union in the extract from Hungarian composer Roland Szentpali's *Pearls III*, a delightful encore that brought the concert's felicitous first half to a satisfying close.

There were even bigger musical fireworks in the second half occupied by *The Planets* suite by British composer Gustav Holst. Due to a recent injury, Curro handed the baton to Warwick Potter for this 50-minute work of many moods inspired by seven of the eight planets circling the sun (earth, the eighth, is not included in Holst's suite).

Composed in 1916, Holst seemed to have had a keen sense of the unfolding horrors of World War I to give Mars the opening place. Directing without a score, Potter immediately caught the aggression and force of the music marching as a well-disciplined and determined army. He kept Holst's stylistic vision well in hand with an über-meticulous, strictly rhythmical baton that gave him a firm grip on the spirit and direction of the suite as crisp, bright and fleet-footed movements gave way to tranquil images in Venus and Saturn.

Every great work has its 'litmus test' moment and for *The Planets* it comes in Jupiter with the snatch of lyricism popularised as the hymn-tune *I Vow to Thee My Country*. Not for nothing have those few bars become the most recognisable and memorable of the entire suite. They need to unfold as a unified texture not fenced in by bar-lines or beating batons, phrases surging forward in a voluptuous path towards the place of the 'more', the 'beyond.' That was not quite achieved here, but the throbbing heartbeat pulse he drew from harps and lower strings in Saturn, the magical bounce of Uranus and Neptune's hushed ending, among other high points, generated a performance of strength and vitality.