

**Queensland Youth Symphony**  
**National Youth Concerto Competition Finals Concert**  
**John Curro and Bradley Voltz, conductors**  
**Old Museum Concert Hall, Brisbane**  
**Sunday October 12, 2014** (by Patricia Kelly)

MANY thoughts floated in the mind at this enthralling 2014 finals concert of Queensland Youth Orchestra's National Youth Concerto competition that has run annually since QYS founding conductor John Curro established it in 1976.

One thought centred on the incredibly high standard of the three teenage finalists, the youngest a mere 14 years. And they weren't playing *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star* either. They were tackling some of the fiercest concertos in the canon.

An unavoidable observation was how this wonderful music event gives the lie to those who condemn Australians as racists. Would that such carping critics had the honesty, nous and ability to understand the impact and import of, let alone attend a gathering such as this and the truths it stands for instead of emitting errant and narrow proclamations. With two of the three finalists having Asian heritage and nurtured within the Australian environment, sharing opportunities for advancement on equal footing as Aussies, and a mixed audience of Aussies of European extraction with parents and friends of Asian backgrounds, it could hardly be declared a racist situation. It was cultural harmony of the highest order.

Then there were the 'poor' judges with the unenviable task of choosing just one winner from the trio of terrific talents, all different, all outstanding. In their position I'd want to give first prize equally to the three, which is not the way this particular game is played.

First contestant was 14-year-old violinist Yebin Yoo who played with QYS and the QYO Chamber Orchestra while she was a student at Emmanuel College, Gold Coast, from 2012 to 2013. She now attends Camberwell High School, Melbourne, and like her fellow finalists has won many music performance prizes.

A determined Yoo was intrepid throughout Armenian composer Aram Khachaturian's *Concerto in D Minor*. She opened this fiendishly difficult work with all sparks firing, heralding a performance that was fearless, strong and clear. With QYS providing a compatible setting and alternating with the soloist in Khachaturian's inventive structures, Yoo's assertive violin textures were as dazzling as glass shards catching sunlight.

Cellist Terence Leung, a Year 11 music scholarship student at Sydney Grammar School, cut a similar swathe through *Sinfonia Concertante in E Minor* by Serge Prokofiev, another edgy work of fierce technical demands. But Leung signalled he was not going to be fazed by such hazards and approached the work with aplomb.

He just kept that cello close to his heart so the two beat as one. After establishing firm, strong gestures in the opening andante, Leung was well up to speed in the allegro middle section, growing even stronger in the final movement. He swept full steam ahead as the orchestra stepped and balanced below his encircling orbit.

If these two gritty concertos were gifts to the technical dexterous, Barber's *Violin Concerto in D minor* centred between the two was pure balm, particularly in the hands of Johnny van Gend, a Toowoomba Grammar School Year 12 student. Barber is a master of lyricism and melodic invention, and amid the concerto's verdant textures Van Gend created a deep sense of yearning. Beautifully centred from start to finish, it was a soothing emotional oasis and a joy to the ear.

One might gasp at the fireworks and dazzling technical accomplishment of the Khachaturian and Prokofiev playing, but with Barber's concerto it was quiet seduction. The tranquillity of Van Gend's playing became pure reverie in the andante movement, where the warmth of the solo violin soared free as air above the quiet orchestra. The *moto perpetuo's* unrelenting energy tested Van Gend's stamina and he was not found wanting when the pace was on.

His sound was not as robust and in-your-face as that of his fellow competitors, but the mellow legato of his playing had a velvet texture that can only mature with age.

But the icing on the cake was to see Bradley Voltz conducting QYS in *Xenocide* by another young talent of superb promise, 22-year-old Samuel Dickenson, also a bass player with QYS and its resident composer. His *Xenocide* exuded confident ideas that hardly needed the narrative program to make its force felt. It gave Voltz plenty of scope to exhibit its interesting dimensions as the judges deliberated.

Voltz has been active in Queensland music circles for some time but his conducting prowess here was a revelation. His suavely economic gestures were potent in drawing out lush orchestral sound, or reeling it in, never gesturing for the sake of 'doing something,' but in a stylish, controlled way to achieve the finest outcome. Long may Voltz wield the baton, and far and wide may his talent be experienced.

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