

CONCERT REVIEWS OF *BEST OF BRASS*

Queensland Youth Symphony
John Curro, conductor
Best of Brass, soloists

QPAC Concert Hall, Brisbane
Saturday 28 March 2015 7pm

Review by Patricia Kelly:

Deciphering and interpreting black dots, dashes and other cryptic hieroglyphics on white pages is the huge task of musicians, anyone playing in a symphony orchestra, for example. The outcome, the aural feast that ensues, is not far short of a miracle such as is achieved every time the 100 players of the Queensland Youth Symphony line up on the QPAC Concert Hall stage in Brisbane for their annual subscription concerts.

For the first concert of each new season about one third of the players are new recruits, so there is a degree of apprehension as to how the new players will 'cut the mustard'. This concern is heightened when a program is as challenging as it was for this 2015 opener. Some of these players are so young. How will they possibly cope with this all-20th century program, one could not help wondering?

Such concerns disappeared when *Overture to Candide* burst out full of vitality and zip, as befitting a composition from the pen of a 20th century master, Leonard Bernstein. Conductor John Curro shaped orchestral colour to its vibrant best, paying full attention to nuance and shading in this descriptive work, all without fuss and fret.

In Larry Sitsky's *Apparitions*, black dots and dashes were at their most mysterious and demanding. With no melody lines to guide eye and ear, this work moved from soft opening to explosive sound, a wind ensemble driving over deep murmuring bass ahead of percussive stabs and splatters. Evocative rather than lyrical in its disjunct mode, rising to a sudden close with full orchestral burst, it was written in 1965 for the then newly-formed Queensland Youth Orchestra. As Sitsky's program note indicated, founding director John Curro could never have dreamt he was to lead those first faltering orchestral steps to full bloom for its 50th anniversary season in 2016.

So 50 years later, Curro had no fear in following Bernstein and Sitsky with even more treacherous musical territory, in *Concerto for Orchestra* by Witold Lutoslawski. But first, there was a delightful *Concerto for Brass Quintet and Orchestra in F major*, written in 1982 by Bavarian composer, Heinz Störrle (born 1933). Here black dots and dashes formed lyrical lines, pastoral and tranquil one minute, dashing forward the next, fusing these elements without losing the distinctive contribution of each component, orchestral and ensemble, in an at times exciting, at times soothing musical architecture that pays tribute to both classical music forms and popular contemporary idioms.

The orchestra alternated, or in turn joined forces with, brass ensemble Best of Brass (BoB) players Robert Schultz, Nathan Schilling (trumpets), Armin Terzer (French horn), Warwick Tyrrell (trombone) and Greg Aitken (bass trombone) for this concerto. These musicians travel Queensland and tour in China, coming up with innovative ideas such as this concerto's Australian premiere. They have also premiered 19 works from Australian composers. Their item was balm between the more prickly works by Sitsky and Lutoslawski.

Polish composer Lutoslawski was a star guest at Brisbane's extraordinary Musica Nova Festival organised by Richard Mills in 1987 (just look at the program if proof be needed) when Lutoslawski conducted his third symphony and other works and observed Queensland Conservatorium sessions - before most of these QYS players were born.

Lutoslawski's mellow compositional style in *Concerto for Orchestra* brought this varied program full circle. QYS players were well guided by conductor Curro through its tension-filled peaks and troughs, a cerebral composition that can never be politically free. An immediate tension in lower strings over throbbing ostinato percussion heralded an agitated mood. Taut upper strings opened the second movement, scampering as section soloists added comments. In spite of the repressive political regime to which Lutoslawski was subject in his native land at the time of its composition, the early 1950s, he was able to break the severe formalism enforced on artists, to produce interesting contrasts, a blaze of brass fading into ominous bass plucking in lower strings in the third movement elegy, among many examples.

It was a tour de force and the players responded brilliantly, producing full and unified orchestral tones with precision and commitment. These are the kind of young Australians United States President Barack Obama surely had in mind as he addressed a youthful audience at University of Queensland during the 2014 G20 summit, lauding the generation as the saviours of the universe (after their elders had messed it all up, presumably). Viva QYS!

Review by Suzannah Conway:

The Queensland Youth Symphony's eclectic program for its first concert of 2015 represented a broad sweep of twentieth-century composition, showcasing Queensland-based quintet, *Best of Brass*, as guest soloists.

Conductor, John Curro, opened with an energetic reading of Leonard Bernstein's popular *Overture to Candide*, the strength of the percussion shining through in some complex and tricky orchestration. With its jazz rhythms, this is a tough piece technically for the strings and they lacked exactness in tempi and a depth of tone in the lyrical section. Fortunately the work came together with aplomb in the heightened finale.

Commissioned by QYO in 1966, Larry Sitsky's *Apparitions* holds an important place in its history. A strange, enigmatic work with no real sense of compositional purpose, frustratingly the work stops and starts, seemingly without direction. All credit to John Curro's strong beat and the QYS for playing so competently.

The Australian premiere of German composer Heinz Störrle's *Concerto for Brass Quintet and Orchestra in F Major*, allowed *Best of Brass* to excel. The concerto featured the ensemble in its own right in every possible combination of players. The first movement's stunning brass chorale progressed to the *Lento* where soloist cadenzas highlighted the dynamics of brass instruments in spectacular fashion. In the final *Allegro* virtuosic passages for horn, trombone and trumpet triumphantly brought the piece to an exciting conclusion. A light encore of gypsy music by Lev Kogan concluded a stimulating first half.

Lutoslawski's rarely performed *Concerto for Orchestra* is a masterpiece of huge orchestral forces requiring exceptional playing. In the style of Bartók, the opening movement displayed fine woodwind and string playing with Concertmaster, Annabelle Swainston, masterfully handling her solo sections. The lyrical high strings of the *Elegia* led to solid work from brass, percussion and harps concluding with a fine contra-bassoon, underpinned by drums and double-basses. The richness of the musical colours in the orchestration throughout the work led to an impressive finale in the *Presto*, the strings marching over a cacophony of brass and percussion to a rousing finish.

Director of Music of QYS since 1966, John Curro will celebrate a remarkable 50 years as the artistic leader of this wonderful youth orchestra in 2016. Now in his ninth decade, Maestro Curro shows no signs of slowing down with his conducting style as incisive as ever, his signature crystal-clear beat supporting his youthful players to perfect their technique with confidence.