

Concert Review by Patricia Kelly

London Symphony

QPAC Concert Hall, Brisbane

Saturday 30 May 2015

Queensland Youth Symphony

John Curro AM MBE, conductor

Emily Newham, Tobias Hill, James Bradley & Trestan McMillan, soloists

It took jazz quite a while to win its place in the symphonic arena but once it crossed the divide it did so in spectacular fashion. It is still going strong as witnessed in this second concert for 2015 presented by the Queensland Youth Symphony. Young as many of the players were, they are up for almost anything. This program tested their mettle and they were not found wanting.

As a student, Melbourne-born composer/pianist Dr Allan Zavod so impressed Duke Ellington that the jazz master sent the budding musician to study at Berklee School of Music in Boston, where he later became Professor and spent the next 25 years in the USA performing, recording and touring with the greats of American music. "Be passionate about your work. With passion you will love what you do as it becomes part of your very existence," Zavod now advises budding composers seeking career advice.

Passion certainly pulsed in his *Good Vibrations* that opened the concert. With its fusion of classical and jazz elements, it challenged the players to the max. They met the challenge with an unrelenting determination, working meticulously through its moto perpetuo opening and pages and pages of reiterations. A piano solo cadenza in the last quarter was balm, a moment of quiet repose exquisitely delivered with rippling strokes by Sophie Min. Under conductor John Curro every section of the orchestra held its position in a taut, unified ensemble, rhapsodic strings alternating with brass and percussion players, making the most of the jazz-driven statements.

Emily Newham, Tobias Hill, James Bradley and Trestan McMillan took solo honours in *Konzertstück opus 86* by Robert Schumann, for orchestra and four French horns, a step back in time (to 1849) to romanticism in all its robust glory. The four soloists glided down this tricky path with aplomb in the first movement with its blazing fanfares and melodic exchanges. Tranquility in the second movement romance allowed the rich honey tones of the horns to reach their expressive best ahead of confident orchestral strides, as bold juxtapositioning of soloists and orchestra created pulsating textures and crisp string playing framed by rhythmic timpani to shape the contours of Schumann's exhilarating music into a unified whole.

As the concert progressed, the music just got better and better, like the wine served last at the scriptural wedding feast of Cana. And music doesn't get much better than *London Symphony* by British composer Ralph Vaughan Williams. It has been recorded that Erik Satie told Debussy to free himself from "the Wagnerian adventure and write French music without *Sauerkraut*." At the same time in England, Vaughan Williams was searching for an English voice for his music and found his natural means of self-realisation in folk music. Art, like charity, should begin at home, he claimed.

Those elements are obvious in his *London Symphony* which is English in name and in nature. But there is much more. It encompasses a broad range of human emotions and experiences beyond national bounds. There is mysticism and spirituality even though Vaughan Williams eschewed such alliances. Personal protestations aside, his music takes a direct and heartfelt line to a transcendent realm. At times it is grounded in Mother earth, but the moments that lift it beyond the material cannot be refuted.

In this performance John Curro tapped into that line to the transcendent. To say it was heavenly is to trivialise the vibes that emanated from this extraordinary band of young people giving their all to Curro's directions and the spirit that was hovering over the performance with its evocations of England and the composer's response to its essence. From the taut, stealthy opening to the broad brushstrokes leading into the finest filigree of the quiet, breathtaking thrill of the closing moments, the spirit of the composer was never far away.

He was there (it was *not* difficult to imagine that) as all sections of the orchestra opened in a gradual awakening to the rich musical textures - firm, assured, resonant, vibrant. In the *lento* movement with another stealthy entry and an evocative *cor anglais* statement, attention was paid to every nuanced detail whether hushed or with full-on energy, and as the viola soloist heralded the dying notes with plaintive tones, a *mysterioso* mood prevailed. Silent stillnesses were tangible, making it more than a performance. It was a communication with another sphere that is central to humanity in all times and places. It was in the playing of course, but it was in the giving and connecting with the symphony's inner depths that made it such a precious moment in this our time, one it was a privilege to have shared.

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