

Concert Review - The Firebird

Saturday 22 August 2015
Queensland Youth Symphony
Conductor: John Curro AM MBE
Piano Soloist: Tony Lee
QPAC Concert Hall

Reviewer: Suzannah Conway

For its third Masterpiece Series Concert of 2015, the Queensland Youth Symphony presented an exciting program including a Strauss Tone Poem, a rarely-performed Beethoven Concerto and the ever-popular Stravinsky masterpiece, *The Firebird*. Challenging repertoire but with the ability to show off the strengths of these talented young orchestral players under the commanding baton of Maestro, John Curro.

Strauss' great Tone Poem, *Death and Transfiguration*, combines some of the composer's most ravishing poetry alongside a formal four-movement structure. This is complex, difficult music that can defeat the most skilled of orchestral players. Despite Curro's strong beat, there were moments, particularly in the third movement, when the players were not in tempi, though Curro skillfully brought it back on track. However this is a minor quibble, given how sensitively it was played. The sweeping lush sonority of the strings gave way to beautiful woodwind obligatos, with some solid brass playing and excellent percussion. This was an excellent reading from Curro, with remarkable warmth and brilliant colour in the playing.

Recent recipient of the Lev Vlassensko Piano Competition, Sydney pianist, Tony Lee, demonstrated his prowess with Beethoven's first major orchestral work, the Piano Concerto No. 2 in B flat Major. Reminiscent of Mozart with flashy and lengthy arpeggios, the Beethoven proved to be an excellent work to highlight his skillful pianistic technique. Lee played with confidence and gusto, his technique assured but also passionate. He has an interesting style with mostly flat hands to the keyboard, but this did not impinge on his intelligent and thoughtful interpretation. He offered a beautiful tone across the work from his excellent arpeggios through the legato of the *Adagio* and the light breezy passages of the *Rondo*.

Due to an overwhelming response from an enthusiastic audience, he delivered a first-rate encore with Grieg's marvelous *Dance of the Dwarves*, the tempi and rhythm both perfect. This is a talent to watch. It would be good to hear him play Russian repertoire in the future.

The second half consisted of Stravinsky's *The Firebird*, favourite repertoire for Maestro Curro and one in which he excels. Offering tantalising narrative music for a huge number of principal orchestral players, it is the perfect piece for a youth symphony to perform. And perform it they did, the music so vivid and stunningly played that it was possible to conjure up images of the dancers on the stage; the woodwind, strings and harps overwhelmingly representing the good characters in the story while the darker strings, brass and percussion mostly the evil forces.

From the first bars, Curro was in complete control of his orchestral forces, layering this intricate music with an exquisite soundscape of colours from the light, lyrical soft strains of a solo violin, flute or French horn through to the dark muted tuba, forceful trombones and powerful drums. All the soloists played exceptionally well and are to be commended.

It was a magnificent achievement and the end of a perfect evening in the concert hall.