

CONCERT REVIEW – ORGAN SYMPHONY

Queensland Youth Symphony
Conductor John Curro AM MBE
QPAC Concert Hall, Brisbane
Saturday 26 March 2016

Review by Patricia Kelly

Coincidence one: On the very day Courier Mail journalist Phil Brown wrote about renowned octogenarians including artist William Robinson, physicist Brian Greene, artistic director Leo Schofield, among others, Queensland's treasured octogenarian conductor John Curro wielded his magical baton for Queensland Youth Symphony's stunning performance at the QPAC Concert Hall of Camille Saint-Saëns' *Symphony No 3 in C minor opus 78*, the 'Organ Symphony'.

In spite of his inspiring achievement over fifty years as director and developer of this extraordinary cultural entity he founded in 1966, Curro was not among the Courier's list of octogenarians. It is the writer's call, of course, which is why Curro's outstanding service is noted in this review context.

Coincidence two: On that same day, the *Courier Mail* included my CD review of *Introit* featuring orchestral music of British composer Gerald Finzi, whose *Concerto for Clarinet and Orchestra opus 31* was performed in this QYS concert with soloist Paul Dean. Finzi's music is rarely performed so this item was keenly anticipated, another example of Curro's singular and challenging program choices for his orchestra over the years.

This QYS 2016 season opener began with a proverbial whimper and ended with a resounding bang, an explosion of orchestral energy and colour. Not that the tinkling triangle notes made an insignificant opening to Stefan Cassomenos' *Jubilee Fanfare*, commissioned for this QYO golden anniversary. Far from it. In the hands of Jennifer Connors, its quiet stealth was captivating.

In 2014 QYS premiered the *Double Violin Concerto* by Cassomenos, a work propelled by an energetic musical impulse. The quiet opening of this composer's new Fanfare presaged an interesting development. But it did not eventuate, even though brass players performing from side balconies suggested a striking opposition of musical forces. While the outer edges of the work were clearly defined, the centre textures were too soft to support the forward trajectory called for by such a fanfare.

Nor did the Finzi work catch fire. True. Finzi, a friend and colleague of Ralph Vaughan Williams, was not a fireworks composer. His was a much more genteel art, elegiac and lyrical, where layers of melody emerged with thoughtful ease. After an unsettled start, Curro created a comfortable milieu of interweaving textures as Dean spun exquisitely-delivered phrases soared and rippled through and around it. Unfortunately it became difficult to concentrate on the music against the visual impact of the soloist's swaying and swooping movements including a hand waving as if to conduct and set the pace (after all, he cut his own orchestral teeth in the QYO). This gentle music was easier to absorb with eyes closed.

The Saint-Saëns symphony might have begun with that stealthy whimper but it quickly gathered pace as it moved through the changing moods and layers of its multicoloured orchestration, with the sharp drumming strokes from percussionist Jennifer Connors again vitalising the music's trajectory. Even though for this first concert of each year almost half the players are graduates to QYS after moving through preparatory QYO groups, on this occasion the novices applied significant energy to its compelling drive.

The music's swift sweeps were well suited to these youthful players who also negotiated the calm of reflective passages. A forthright unity of purpose was well established as the judicious sounds James Goldrick drew from the mighty Klais organ flowed into this music field, a quiet participant in the symphony's first movement but a decisive and commanding contributor to the triumphant close.

From such young players this response was amazing, the culmination of years of development in this music organisation, and in music academies. Oh! to be young and playing Saint-Saëns with such gusto! What a gift to the city and to Queensland is this orchestra, and what a gift too is John Curro whose years of dedicated work has helped bring young players to such an exhilarating level of musicianship. It is the magic of music. May we never lose it.