



Music Festival: Americans set a challenge

Canberra International Music Festival
“Double Duo and Friends” (Concert 24)
Albert Hall, May 18, 2013
Review and photos by Judith Crispin

THIS celebration of American music was one of the most challenging programs of the Canberra International Music Festival.

Synergy percussion ensemble kicked things off with a new arrangement of “China Gates” by Pulitzer Prize-winning composer John Adams. This ornate work creates a music box effect, and Synergy performed it with precision and sensitivity.

A second work by Adams, “Road Movies” for electric violin and piano, was brought to audience acclaim by renowned pianist Lisa Moore and violinist Karen Bentley Pollick. This three-movement minimalistic work, based on the manipulation of short cells, recalls the all-American sounds of George Antheil and Steve Reich.



Bentley Pollick’s violin playing was nothing short of astonishing, delivering absolute precision with double and triple stops, as well as accented bowed staccati. In the scordatura second movement, she produced low tones of a truly extraordinary timbre. Lisa Moore demonstrated incredible stamina with her effortless presentation of the relentless piano part, particularly in the vigorous final movement.



Martin Bresnick charmed the audience with his “Ishi’s Song”, based on a recording of the last Yahi Indian. The work began sweetly, with pianist Lisa Moore singing the little song upon which this work is based, the piano then picking up the tune for the first few bars. Bresnick achieves a wind chime effect with his clever use of sostenuto pedal, building up layers of harmonic colour beneath delicate rhythmic patterns. Moore brought out lovely bell-tones from the Steinway and maintained a

chant-like character throughout the work. Intricate passages become gradually sparser, until “Ishi’s Song” was reduced finally to a single repeated note – a poignant metaphor for the last Yahi singer.

The final work of the evening was an unexpected pleasure for me – Paul Drescher’s semi-improvised “Glimpsed from Afar” for his invented instrument the “Quadrachord”, (a giant construction with long amplified strings) and a MIDI controller, the Marimba Lumina, played by Joel Davel. The musicians used laptops to generate loops and define synthesis parameters, creating a shifting palate of musical colour. “Glimpsed from Afar” revealed the influence of Indian Carnatic music – its extended melodies produced with bowed Quadrachord, in a singing style not dissimilar to the musical saw.

The poetic quality of the music soon expanded into thunderous percussive sonorities produced by mallets on Quadrachord strings. A noise like huge helicopters was generated by pummelling the Quadrachord with fists and palms, building to cacophony, layer by layer. The audience threw concert tradition to the wind and showed their appreciation with cheers, whistles and stamping.

Judith Crispin is a composer, writer, photographer and director of Manning Clark House.