

Classical Year in Review: Passion, high-quality performances in superior efforts

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Above everything else, the one significant feature of this past year was the sustained high quality of performance, both from visiting artists and from across the spectrum of local music-making activities. Three concerts soared above the ruck, but you didn't have to look too hard to find others that would have shone just as strikingly 10, or even five, years ago.

Setting up high expectations in February, Concerto Italiano presented a splendid reading of Monteverdi's 1610 *Vespers*, director Rinaldo Alessandrini giving his 23 executants every encouragement while investing the richly-coloured score with generous vigour. Several bodies have worked through this pivotal work over past decades, but none with as much devotion and pinpoint clarity. Equally as refreshing, in July the Choir of Trinity College Cambridge appeared in a night of demanding, mainly contemporary music under the Musica Viva umbrella. This ensemble turned Frank Martin's *Mass for Unaccompanied Double Choir* into a revelation; where you expected awkwardness and effort, the British singers under Stephen Layton delineated each line with impeccable clarity, their fluent interpretation somehow improving on itself as each segment passed.

While these were memorable nights for all the best reasons, other enterprises ran them pretty close. It's hard to recall a time when the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra worked to such consistently impressive interpretative and emotionally satisfying effect, particularly under Sir Andrew Davis. From a powerful Strauss *Alpine* Symphony, through Mahler 5 and 6 in the ongoing cycle, an authoritatively expansive *In the South (Alassio)* of Elgar, supporting James Ehnes in the amiable Strauss Violin Concerto and Richard Tognetti in his idiosyncratic and transporting version of *The Lark Ascending* by Vaughan Williams, the chief conductor raised his musicians' operating temperature level significantly.

Much the same energetic verve recurred when Simone Young fronted a commanding and resonant Bruckner Symphony No.9, Jakub Hrusa introduced most of us to Suk's *Asrael*, Christoph Konig revisited with flair the Brahms E minor Symphony, and Benjamin Northey brought out the best from the MSO Chorus in a luminous Faure *Requiem*. Almost as rewarding, Vadim Gluzman fronted the Brahms Violin Concerto, his fusion with Davis' orchestral support exemplary; and, in Paul Lewis' informed review of the Beethoven piano concertos, a group of 15 put together a riveting account of Schoenberg's Chamber Symphony No.1.

The Australian Chamber Orchestra and Synergy Percussion exceeded expectations with a crisp, resonant reading of Bartok's *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta*, confirmed their superior standing by a lucid vision of Bach's *Orchestral Suite No.1*, and supported Slava Grigoryan in the *Concierto de Aranjuez* with detailed polish. Apart from the Trinity College visit, Musica Viva's season held two other treasures: the Jerusalem Quartet performed a searching Dvorak No.13, then Benjamin Beilman and Andrew Tyson hurtled fearlessly through Saint-Saens' *Violin Sonata in D minor*.

Other chamber music events of merit included pianist Kathryn Selby's trio recitals – particularly a Mendelssohn C minor with Susie Park and Clancy Newman, and the Beethoven *Ghost* informed by Dene Olding and Julian Smiles; the Australian String Quartet successfully revisiting Ravel; a heart-warming Dvorak A Major String Sextet headed by Markiyany Melnychenko on an Australian Octet program; and pianists Lars Vogt, Alexander Gavrylyuk and Dejan Lazic powering up Melbourne Recital Centre's Great Performers series.

Finally, three inspiring passages of play: Peter Dumsday's brilliantly sustained piano solo in Brendan Colbert's dense *Like a Maelstrom* for the Arcko Symphonic Ensemble in March; tenor Andrew Goodwin's faultless Evangelist for the Melbourne Bach Choirs' *St Matthew Passion* on Good Friday; and the *Gloria* from the Ensemble Gombert

singing their namesake's *Quam pulchra es* Mass – a brilliantly executed paean, simultaneously overwhelming and exalting.

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