
Fresh take on Mozart exhilarates, a shock for purists

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So habituated are we to hearing Mozart performed in a mild-mannered, decorous way that it can come as a shock when the lid is lifted on his music. This is what happened with the Mahler Chamber Orchestra at the Adelaide Festival in performances of Mozart's last three symphonies of phenomenal power that turned the tables on what "classical style" really means.

The orchestra uses modern instruments and produces a full sound, so their concert was never going to please purists. Yet their view under brilliant British conductor Daniel Harding presented a truthfulness that was transcendent, exhilarating and hugely compelling. The initial timpani strikes and throbbing cellos in Symphony No 39 in E-flat major announced it all: vigorous ideas, sweeping momentum and gusty force.

The ensemble comprises 45 musicians from around the world, including four from Australia, or five if one includes British concertmaster Andrew Haveron, who also holds the same role with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra.

Showing impeccable tonal focus and precision, they performed at the very pinnacle of what orchestral playing can deliver. The strings lent weighty, resounding force to Symphony No 39's opening chords and greyhound zip to its cascading trails of demisemiquaver scales. Flute, clarinet and bassoon were deliciously mellow and blended.

The orchestra's ability to reignite Mozart's language came down to one factor: Harding. He sculpted the music's energy to create an absorbing narrative.

Only an excessively fast third movement Menuetto raised an eyebrow. Some of its character was lost in the pursuit of speed. Brisk tempos worked better in Symphony No 40 in G minor. Harding was swift and understated in its main theme, saving everything up for screeching contrasts that punctuated the first movement.

Here was Mozart with brittle, almost manic emotion — and thoroughly believable thanks to a perfectly poised tension that Harding and his orchestra maintained to the end.

This work's surprising, teeth-clenching intensity brought to mind Beethoven. Perhaps both composers were co-conspirators in revolutionising the symphony.

Symphony No 41 in C major (*Jupiter*), possessed bellowing power and great delicacy in the themes that play out through each movement and combine in the concluding bars.

Another festival high point was Chamber Landscapes at Ukaria in Mount Barker. Curator and recorder player Genevieve Lacey assembled a wonderfully varied fleet of musicians for this series. Much attention centred on viola da gamba player, Paolo Pandolfo.

Gliding over his instrument's seven strings with power, ease and infinite delicacy, his virtuosity in Ortiz, Marais and Forqueray was breathtaking. Equally admirable was his ability to communicate through strong outward gesture to make it immediately enjoyable for a modern audience; there was nothing cerebral here.

Pandolfo's rhythmic gusto in more rustic styled dance movements was remarkable: highly energetic but free of harshness, and enhanced by a gorgeous sounding consort of gamba, bassoon, double bass, organ, harp and vihuela.

Norway's Trio Mediaeval also hold a great cache in the early music world, and the three singers were spellbindingly beautiful in Gregorian chant and other liturgical music from the 12th to 14th centuries, along with captivating arrangements of traditional Norwegian song.

Their flowing line, immaculate intonation and generosity of spirit are simply unmatched by any comparable group.