

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT MUSIC REVIEWS

Orchestra anniversary big, penetrating and thrilling



HELEN MUSA
JUNE 26, 2023

SHARE THIS



Louis Sharpe conducts the NCO. Photo: Peter Hislop

Music / "Anniversaries", National Capital Orchestra. At Albert Hall, June 25. Reviewed by ***ROB KENNEDY****.*

FORTY years of performing major symphonic works produce more than just music, it creates a community, and the National Capital Orchestra has built a wealth of musical talent in Canberra.

Celebrating the 40 years, the NCO performed two Australian works and an old favourite in Albert Hall.

It's difficult to estimate what the NCO has meant to the many members who have been involved with the group over its 40-year history, but it is best summed up by Eric Pozza, a current NCO bassist: "NCO is a community orchestra, so it's a meeting of people who love music and play it. In NCO's case, people who play it well. So, it's a social gathering but also a serious commitment and a huge thrill that strangely subsides as the applause swells. My favourites? Our yearly meetup with Canberra Choral Society in Llewellyn Hall: 100+ people on stage, orchestra, solo singers, and choir. This is goosebumps territory".

Kristian Chong on piano. Photo: Peter Hislop

Under music director Louis Sharpe, they began with "Through Healers' Eyes" by the Ukrainian-Australian composer, Catherine Likhuta. Dramatic bell tolling, pounding timpani, deep, dark brass and an elusive, almost threatening tune swelled this opening work.

The sound of the NCO was big, penetrating and thrilling. The orchestration and composition spoke of a composer who knows her craft. The huge orchestra, with many percussion instruments, piano and booming brass above the other players on stage, all created a fanfare of music that belied the gentle title of this piece. Epic stuff.

The "Paganini Variations", by Sergei Rachmaninoff with soloist Kristian Chong on piano is an exhilarating work. Chong is a captivating pianist with thrilling technical and emotional brilliance.

This work is no simple feat for any pianist, and Chong created a wonderful sound. So did the NCO. This is orchestrally colourful and highly rhythmic music. It's theatrical and designed to make a mark. As with much of Rachmaninoff's works, it's filled with passionate and memorable tunes, even if it's a transcription. It's unmistakably Rachmaninoff.

Through this demanding long work, the NCO created a powerful sound. Perhaps inspired by the brilliance of Chong's playing, they mostly did the music justice. For a community orchestra, they punch above their weight. Sharpe had them sounding at their best.

After the interval, another monumental work. The "Symphony No. 3, Century", which tells the story of Canberra's origin, written by Andrew Schultz.

It was a trial for some in the orchestra, especially in the brass, and several of the string players had problems with intonation. The style of the music, while tonal, seemed to be a bit of a challenge. Greater control was needed.

It is a searching piece that undulates as sections pop out against the play of music. Full of tension, the first movement is never at rest with itself; and it's a clever work. The second movement was a more unified whole. It followed a similar theme throughout as it built to a grand crescendo for the entire orchestra and then came to a soft rest using the same melody.

A triumphant call on the brass started the last movement. A driving beat representing progress hammered out a defiant statement before a reflective pastoral tune spoke of Canberra's country setting.

A grand sweeping theme told another story as musical motives flew across the orchestra. A huge final burst was coming, and when it hit with every player at their loudest, it created a cracking, dynamic finale.

Who can be trusted?

In a world of spin and confusion, there's never been a more important time to support independent journalism in Canberra.

If you trust our work online and want to enforce the power of independent voices, I invite you to make a small contribution.

Every dollar of support is invested back into our journalism to help keep citynews.com.au strong and free.

Become a supporter

Thank you,

Ian Meikle, editor



HELEN MUSA
JUNE 26, 2023

SHARE THIS