

Review: Choir hands centre stage to orchestra

“Choral Gold: A Treasury of Choral Music”

The Llewellyn Choir, Canberra Youth Orchestra and Canberra Children’s Choir, conducted by Rowan Harvey-Martin

At Llewellyn Hall, November 17

Reviewed by Helen Musa

THE concert, undoubtedly intended as a crowd pleaser, proved less a treasury of golden classics of choral music than a bowl of luscious fruit, with a few veggies thrown in.

Beginning on an impressively sombre note with Purcell’s “Funeral Music for Queen Mary, the choir, full strength at first for Victoria’s “O Magnum Mysterium”, frequently diminished to what they call the “semi-choir”, as it performed works by Palestrina and Monteverdi. This early part of the concert was quite uneven, strong in the fully harmonised group work and weaker in the smaller group that performed difficult songs involving overlapping musical themes.

Initially the Canberra Children’s Choir, full of restless young people, one unable to suppress her dancing leg movements, appeared timid, but really livened up for “Uluru”, by Harley Mead, projecting their voices in their excitement perfectly to the audience.

The performance of two works by Samuel Barber was as variable as the early works, sometimes strong, sometimes fading.

With the arrival of the Canberra Youth Orchestra at symphony strength, singers and musicians alike hit the right note with a lively performance of Borodin’s “Polovetsian Dances”, with orchestra and singers perfectly-balanced by conductor Rowan Harvey-Martin, who revealed herself as the evening wore on, to be a conductor with a sense of humour.”

The second half of the program began with quieter selections from Mendelssohn’s “Elijah”, moved rapidly Related Bergstein’s “Chichester Psalms” which gave musical opportunities to all sections of the performance, and culminated in a spectacular rendition of Carl Orff’s “O Fortuna,” the music once used to accompany fireworks on Lake Burley Griffin.

There was more to come. Although we never got to hear the “Phantom of the Opera” tunes promised in the publicity, we did get a largely instrumental medley from “West Side Story,” showing just what a mature ensemble the Canberra Youth Orchestra has developed into.

But while the full Llewellyn Choir entered for a spectacular concluding rendition of “America”, in the end I was forced to conclude that choral music took second place to instrumental performance in this musical treasure-house.