

Complex, compelling and engaging from beginning to end



Rowan Harvey-Martin conducting the concert.. Photo: Peter Hislop

*Music / “Bernstein”, Llewellyn Choir, St Andrew’s Presbyterian Church, Forrest, December 11. Reviewed by **CLINTON WHITE**.*

“WEST Side Story” is Leonard Bernstein’s most popular and recognised work, with its many moods, singable tunes, infectious dance rhythms, and orchestrations that surprise and intrigue.

But his choral works – there are several – are not as well-known. So, it was both instructive and interesting to hear two of them: the “Chichester Psalms”, from 1965, and “Mass”, from 1971.

In some clever, out-of-left-field, scene-setting programming, Llewellyn Choir’s music director, Rowan Harvey-Martin, began each half with instrumental performances by members of the Llewellyn Sinfonia. Harvey-Martin led the ensemble from the piano.

Opening the first half were three tunes by the American jazz quartet, FOURPLAY, which keyboardist, Bob James founded and leads. Two of the tunes the Sinfonia played, “Max-O-Man” and “Bali Run”, had been released on FOURPLAY’s self-titled debut album in 1991. They sandwiched “Chant”, from their second album, “Between the Sheets”, released two years later.

Perhaps more in the rock idiom than the jazz idiom, these three offerings did not seem to sit entirely comfortably with the ensemble. There was a general stiffness and tentativeness to the performances, saved by some nice improvisation work on the alto sax by Rouslan Babajanov.

Introducing the second half, the same ensemble performed two works by Dave Grusin, “Mountain Dance” and “On Golden Pond” (this one beautifully augmented by the Sinfonia’s strings), followed by Spyro Gyra’s “Morning Dance”.

The ensemble gave much more assured performances of these tunes. Once again, Babajanov, this time variously on soprano and alto saxes, treated the sizable audience to imaginative improvs.

“Chichester Psalms” was commissioned by the Dean of Chichester Cathedral, Sussex, for its 1965 festival. The Dean wrote, “Many of us would be very delighted if there was a hint of West Side Story about the music.”

There are three movements sung in Biblical Hebrew, each quoting from two Psalms. The first features Psalms 108 and 100 and is quite joyous, written in 7/4 time, giving a rollicking rhythm. The second is the most interesting and contrasting, quoting Psalm 23 (“The Lord is my Shepherd”) and Psalm 2 (“Why do the nations rage”), and featured soloist Sonia Anfiloff. The third quotes Psalms 131 and 133, beginning with a quite discordant piano introduction, yielding to lovely harmonious and melodic echoes across the choir and, finally, a quiet and reflective *a Capella* conclusion.

Harvey-Martin had excellent control throughout, with good balance between choir and orchestra, attractive intonation, and finely tuned expression. Some of the very high notes, especially at the end, proved something of a challenge for the sopranos.

“Mass” was written for the opening of the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, DC. It is interesting that Bernstein would choose to write a setting of the Catholic liturgy, considering his Russian-Jewish background. That, along with his social activist beliefs and his overall approach to the composition, caused some controversy in the Catholic hierarchy, and even the White House.

The quirky work reflects just about every one of Bernstein’s writing genres, from rock to Middle Eastern to musical theatre. As such, its complexity is compelling and engaging from beginning to end.

Harvey-Martin embraced those qualities admirably, leading her forces, which included soloists and members of the Gabriel Singers and Bella Voce from Canberra Girls Grammar, through this difficult and challenging work in a very satisfying performance.