

Festival Opens on a Double High

***Journeys*, presented by Orchestra Geelong and Geelong Youth Orchestra conducted by Mark Shiell, opening 12th annual Windfire Festival, Friday March 11, 2022 in St Mary's Basilica.**

Though titled *Journeys*, this concert might well have carried the name *Contrasts*, for this first event in the postponed 12th Windfire Festival of Music fell very much into two distinct halves.

And that was surprising, because the music for two independent but connected Geelong community orchestras was chosen from the same palette and both were directed and conducted by the same man, Mark Shiell.

The first half had the 55-member Orchestra Geelong presenting 19th Century pieces by Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov and Jacques Offenbach with soloists showcasing works by Elgar and von Weber.

Orchestra Geelong grew from our city's Geelong Community Orchestra, which began in the 1980s as a group of amateur musicians with a common love of playing in ensembles.

Now, 40 years on and with the established leadership of Mark Sheill, the orchestra has grown in stature and expertise.

Added to this, it displayed two new, non-musical but significant elements.

First there was the conductor's enthusiasm, displayed by his cheerfully inclusive introductions and reinforced by his conducting style. This was, broadly speaking, to keep the music's tempo by bouncing on the balls of his feet while his smooth, graceful arm movements and smiling countenance urged and charmed his musicians to his will at every beat.

The second added element was the sheer joy that individual members showed at playing together in public following two years of Covid-enforced lockdown. This had included, Mark told us, attempts to rehearse via zoom – and it's easy to visualise the impossibility of bringing together 55 instruments using the fragile zoom infrastructure. Maybe it did help bring the players together, because this short concert did not lack cohesion.

It started brightly and effectively, with Rimsky-Korsakov's *Alborada*, then moved to a more mellow and sombre tone with the *1st movement from Elgar's Cello Concerto* impressively delivered by young soloist Ilana Idris. This was contrasted again with the smooth melody of Offenbach's *Barcarolle*, followed by the second soloist, Dean Cronkwright, leading the *1st movement from von Weber's Clarinet concerto in F minor*. Dean's programme notes said that he had been unable to play his instrument for 15 years following a throat injury. It was wonderful to see, hear – and feel part of – his remarkable comeback.

Then a neat return to Rimsky-Korsakov with his thrilling *Dance Of The Tumblers* brought the first act to a suitable end.

Following a short chair-shuffling interval, the Geelong Youth Orchestra moved into place for its first-ever concert. This was again conducted by Mark Shiell, who directs both orchestras.

Apart from the ages, there were several differences, between the evening's two orchestras. The GYO is smaller, with fewer strings and a larger wind section.

This allowed, for this critic, a more evenly balanced sound.

But probably the biggest change was that, where Orchestra Geelong's volunteers showed their joy at playing together, the GYO is built around talented music students

who applied their learned skills in an atmosphere of measured concentration. The result was they produced a remarkably crisp clarity of sound that was magnified by the venue's excellent acoustics.

Their concert selection included two intricate Mozart pieces, each perfectly executed and contrasted by two smooth film scores by John Williams. These were different, too, with jaunty magical *Highlights of Harry Potter* and the concert's stirring finish using climactic themes from *The Empire Strikes Back*.

Plus there was the familiar overture to Tchaikovsky's *Romeo & Juliette* and, for the sake of continuity, Rimsky-Korsakov's *Themes from Scheherazade*.

All were performed with such talent and skill to earn a standing ovation from the Basilica's packed opening-night audience.

This ovation, though thoroughly deserved, caught both conductor and orchestra by surprise, with conductor Mark apologising and admitting that they hadn't prepared an encore.

But in truth, we audience didn't need one.

For us, it was enough to have experienced such an evening of contrasting musical skills and emotions – and the opportunity to witness what must surely be the beginning of a new musical force in our city.

– *Colin Mockett*