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Gentleness-Suddenness, Bruce Crossman

Posted: July 3, 2013 | Author: partialdurationscontributor | Filed under: Reviews | Tags: Bruce Crossman, Chinese Opera, Lotte Lenjerie, Michael Kieran Harvey, Penny Pavlou | Leave a comment »

Gentleness-Suddenness
Campbelltown Arts Centre
29 June 2013
Review by James Nightingale

Campbelltown Arts Centre brought together four of Australia’s finest exponents of new classical music to perform a program of works by Sydney based composer Bruce Crossman. Crossman’s music brings facets of Asian musical idioms into what is fundamentally a contemporary classical musical language, creating a thoroughgoing cultural dialogue that takes the performers to their virtuoso limits.

Double Resonances, composed in 2006, is a duet for piano, played by Michael Kieran Harvey, and a world of percussion brought to life by Claire Edwardes. The contrasting resonances of the instruments themselves, and of the music of east and west, form the defining feature of this evocative work. On the one hand, the density and harmonic homogeneity of the piano speaks from the Western concert hall, while on the other, Asian gongs, crotale, tam-tam, bowed vibraphone and cymbals carry the listener into the unique idiomatic sounds of metal—a battery formed from the sounds of the Chinese, Korean, Japanese and Indonesian instruments that are now common in Western contexts.

Crossman favours a structural arc on which to pin his musical ideas. In Double Resonances, this arc travelled from a bleak stasis broken only by muted plucked piano through a dialogue between ‘jazz piano’ and ‘gamelan’ and back again. This journey was regularly punctuated by shared ensemble pulses/gestures that carried the weight and momentum of the work. Seeing the performers work with single-mindedness to carry through the complex instructions of the score was fascinating and rewarding for an audience that had made the journey on a rainy night to the CAC.

Violinist James Guddeford joined Edwardes and Harvey for Not Broken Bruised Reed (composed in 2010), a work that also moved through an arc shaped structure. Here, the structure felt like Crossman had established a sound world based upon the natural fundamentals of the tones that was disrupted by the drama and journey of the work. The return of the original timbres of the work underlined the ritual space that the work inhabits, a sensation highlighted by the players speaking and whistling as they played.
After the interval Harvey, Cuddeford and Edwardes were joined by mezzo-soprano Lotte Latuken for the premiere performance of Gentleness-Suddenness. This song cycle expands the artistic palette of the instruments with text, pictures and live electronics. As the title implies, the piece is about contrasts, although gentleness and suddenness are by no means antonyms of each other. Consisting of two parts—“Water and Fire” and “Spirit”—which again utilized the arc structure which framed the musical drama. The musical content in this piece, however, was directed more particularly at the task of giving colour and nuance to the texts. The text, which was assembled by Crossman from fragments of the Bible and Chinese Opera (specifically from the Peony Pavilion), was in effect a love poem, brought to life by Latuken’s voice which travelled effortlessly through a joyful range of colours and textures.

The visual element of the performance, featuring photographs by David Cubby and film by Ljgeli Barkat, attempted to provide a context to the musical discourse; however, I for one found it difficult to take my attention away from the performers. Perhaps the musical details and language of the work were more obvious to my ears than to others? The experiment should be persisted with, as I’m sure that this kind of creative collaboration will lead to further artistic insights for all involved.

Hearing several of Crossman’s pieces in succession provided a clear window into his aesthetic—space, clarity, action and reaction—and language, one that incorporates aspects of Asian music expressed through the idiomatic sounds of Western instruments. Harvey, Edwardes, Cuddeford and Latuken took painstaking care to bring out the ensemble and individual details that underpin Crossman’s scores. The works were recorded during the week prior to the concert and there will be many among the audience, like myself, who will be keen to have a second listen to the performances of these mysterious and subtle pieces. This was an engrossing and satisfying concert of music that displayed the highest artistic ambition and craft on the part of composer and performers.