

Oresteia: a tough but worthwhile listen

REVIEWED BY PATRICK SHEPHERD.

THE ORESTEIA EXPERIENCE, 10 SEPTEMBER. THE GREAT HALL.

Iannis Xenakis' opera *Oresteia* formed the focal point for the University of Canterbury's Oresteia Experience, a collaboration between UC's School of Music, Classics Department, Logie Collection and the Tece Museum of Classical Antiquities, now housed at the Arts Centre. For a work that was largely written around 50 years ago, it is as innovative and cutting-edge as anything being written today, arguably more so, and in musician's vernacular it definitely comes under the banner of "a tough listen". In preparation for the performance, pre-concert talks by Mark Menzies and Patrick O'Sullivan plus a visit to the antiquities collection all helped to contextualise the actual opera.

Oresteia is pretty impenetrable by anyone's standards and would require significantly more listens to fully absorb the nuances. On the surface, it is a tale of horror, violence and blood vengeance while serving as a didactic vehicle espousing civilisation and the need for law and order.

Huge kudos goes to conductor Mark Menzies and his supporting creative and production teams for the enormous amount of work

that went in to this production and for having the vision to see a project like this through. Involving UC's chamber choir Consortia, an instrumental ensemble drawn from the staff and student body at UC and the CSO, plus a children's chorus, this was a significant undertaking.

Drawing it all together were the virtuosic skills of singer Randall Scotting and percussionist Justin DeHart. It really was an extended double concerto for these two. Scotting was absolutely amazing, commanding the stage for two long periods of demanding extremes that had him in his lower register for Agamemnon and screaming falsetto as Cassandra. There can surely only be a handful of singers on the planet that can carry this off and with his strong physical presence he really was remarkable. Acting almost as a third voice in the narrative, DeHart's playing was relentlessly energetic and technically masterful, maintaining his focus and precision over a sustained period.

Consortia did a creditable job of both singing and choreographing the drama. This would have been towards the ultimate end of their experiential spectrum but they coped admirably. Often exposed and each requiring to lead, there were obviously stronger bits than others



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but all were committed to the task and made the thing work. Choreographer Julia Harvie and designer Stuart Lloyd-Harris came up with something that was both visually interesting and dra-

matically convincing. White polystyrene cubes literally formed the building blocks for all the staging ideas and this in itself tied together much of the action.

But I keep coming back to

Scotting and his vocal wizardry. Given that *Oresteia* is a piece that tests one's tolerance at times and doesn't make friends easily, Scotting's performance on its own was well worth turning out for.