

A Delightful Concert with the DRO

by Bill Pell

A capacity audience at the Mooroolbark Community Centre for an excellent DRO (Dandenong Ranges Orchestra) performance on Sunday, 20th October 2019, was treated to a couple of extra non-musical surprises. The first was a birthday cake to celebrate the orchestra's 35th year; the second, I'll reveal in due course.

The orchestra presented a well-balanced programme which was well within the capacity of this much-improved non-professional community ensemble, and was well received by an enthusiastic audience.

The concert got off to an interesting start with a modern composition by now-local Melbourne composer, Natalya Vagner. *Eagle Flight Bunjil* celebrated an aboriginal creation story from the local Kulin nation. Whilst 'modern' the piece, written especially for the DRO, was also accessible, as we followed the flight of the eagle Bunjil and the creation of Port Phillip Bay. The composer told me that it had been performed in Russia recently, but I'm happy to characterise this performance as an Australian premiere!

A lively movement from Weber's clarinet concerto followed; the soloist being Ilya Lynn who, since arriving in Australia in 1991, has been involved in the musical education (clarinet and saxophone) of Melbourne's youth. I was sorry that we weren't treated to a virtuoso encore, either immediately or at the end of the concert.

A rousing rendition of the overture from Offenbach's *Orpheus in the Underworld* followed. The people sitting around me were almost tempted to get up and dance when the cancan music appeared. The overture encapsulates all the main musical themes of the opera/opera and I was left wondering why it is so little performed in

Melbourne. The last time I recall seeing it was at Monash's Alexander Theatre perhaps thirty years ago.

During the interval we consumed the birthday cake which had, presumably, been cut into 139 pieces - the sum total of the ticketed audience.

The whole of the second half post-interval session of the concert was devoted to Bizet's *Carmen*. His *Carmen Suite* includes most of the musical themes of the opera, and had an easy recognition amongst the audience. This was followed by the Sarasate *Carmen Fantasia*, a work for violin and orchestra. The soloist was 14-year old Leon Fei who played with an expressive facility which belied his youth. He left so quickly after the concert that I was unable to quiz him about his aims and ambitions, so am reduced to opining that he will go a long way as an accomplished violinist.

Finally we were treated to the 'Toreador' song from *Carmen* sung with his usual gusto by Alexander Pokryshevsky. His deep bass voice filled the hall with ease. The conductor, Alexander Verngerovski, had invited us to sing along with the chorus of this piece, but for most of us it was just one word, 'Toreador', which we belted out with the singer; some knew the next two words, 'En Garde', but after that we were lost. It was after this stirring rendition that we got our second surprise. From the second row of the orchestra, previously hidden by the violin section, emerged a young boy carrying the French horn he had been playing. He proved to be Maxim, the 11-year old son of the bass vocalist - and what a cheer he got! Now, I have a passing acquaintance with Alexander Pokryshevsky, having conversed with him after the last DRO concert and seeing him subsequently in the chorus at opera performances in Melbourne, most notably Opera Australia's production of Wagner's *Die Meistersinger*. I had seen him carrying a horn on his arrival at the community centre and had wondered why. Now I had my answer.

I have been to many DRO concerts and have remarked above how the orchestra has improved. This is not to denigrate the achievements of previous conductors/musical directors, some of whom have shepherded the ensemble through tough times, but after talking to a couple of the musicians I am convinced that it is the unfailing enthusiasm and musicianship of the current conductor, Alexander Verngerovski, which has rubbed off on them.

It was pleasing to find Beverley McAlister gracing the audience. It was she and her husband, Murray, who founded the Dandenong Ranges Music Council in 1979. The DRO arose from this in 1984, and we did enjoy the celebratory cake; and I hasten to add, this concert. I'm not sure when the next concert will be held, but I shan't miss it - and neither should you!

* * * * *

Bill Pell is not a musician, but rather a music 'consumer'; from 'pop' music to opera. He has been to performances in most of the Concert Halls and Opera Houses of Europe, so reckons he is qualified to rabbit on about any performance he has enjoyed, particularly this DRO one.