

Perth Cathedral hosts chilling Holocaust piece

Wednesday, 04 August 2010

St Mary's Cathedral showcased a powerful reminder of how low humans can sink, and their undying capacity for redemption



In the foreground, one of Peter Tanfield's students David Sanzone, leader of the orchestra, performs at St Mary's Cathedral, with Soprano Sarah Guilmartin and Tenor Matthew Reardon. Photo: Jon Green

By Anthony Barich

AN oratorio performed at St Mary's Cathedral last week that was written in 1938 as a protest against the Nazis' atrocities against Jews has much to say to today's audiences about darkness and human compassion, its musical director said.

WA Academy of Performing Arts Head of Strings Peter Tanfield directed British pacifist Sir Michael Tippett's oratorio *A Child of Our Time*, performed by WAAPA's Faith Court Orchestra and Classical Voice Department with the John Septimus Roe Anglican Community School at the Cathedral on 29 July.

Mr Tanfield told *The Record* that the stark contrast between moments reflecting tender compassion and those moments where "the music screams" to depict the full horror the Jews were subjected to is its great strength.

The work, whose three-part structure is understood to be based on Handel's *Messiah*, centres around *Kristallnacht* ("Crystal Night"), a night in November 1938 when 1,350 Jewish synagogues were burnt to the ground or destroyed; over 91 Jews were killed; 30,000 Jews were thrown into concentration camps; 7,000 Jewish businesses were destroyed; and thousands of Jewish homes were ransacked.

This was all allegedly in response to the 17 year old son of a Polish Jew - who along with up to 17,000 others were rounded up and put into military stables in impossible conditions - shot a German embassy official to "do" something to bring the world's attention to what was happening to Jews in Germany.

Perth Cathedral hosts chilling Holocaust piece

Wednesday, 04 August 2010

In reality, the pogrom had been planned; the murder was just a pretext. Through the most turbulent music to the tender moment when the teen's mother ponders how to help her son in prison, the production reminds the audience about what it is to be human, Tanfield said.

Tanfield, whose own mother's family of Jewish extraction in Venice, Italy converted to Catholicism for fear of the Fascists, told The Record that Tippett uses *Kristallnacht* to discuss "how we all have this darkness, but also this potential of the light in us; and that we must not let the darkness swamp the light".

"We see in so many cases where this lack of compassion is enduring still - where so-called civilised people are not connecting to the fundamental human behaviours of compassion, understanding and gentleness," Tanfield said.

Though the oratorio is based on German author Ödön von Horváth's novel *Ein Kind unserer Zeit* ("A Child of Our Time"), it avoids conventional narrative. Rather, it speaks through its music, during which, in just under an hour and 10 minutes, "you do a massive emotional journey", Tanfield said.

"The music requires a very high level of sensitivity; a beautifully written, complicated score in a sense, all serving this over-riding message where music paints the words," he said.

"You go from something soft and gentle to something very excoriating. It is this contrast that gives it such force."

Its model has also been described by Opera Today as being based on Bach's *St Matthew Passion*, "with its urgency and somber beauty".

Tippett himself said of his work: "Part I of the work deals with the general state of oppression in our time.

"Part II presents the particular story of a young man's attempt to seek justice by violence and the catastrophic consequences; and Part III considers the moral to be drawn, if any."

The significance of *A Child of Our Time* lies beyond its religious significance, reflecting as it does Tippett's indignation about the "meanness and sheer wanton cruelty on humans by other humans", which in the production so sharply contrasts with the fundamental Christian ethic of "love thy neighbour as thyself", Tanfield said.

In depicting how the Jews were "disenfranchised, stripped of everything", the oratorio portrays "a desperation, a terrifying darkness, but it's also based on a novel by a pacifist, an anti-Nazi, an aristocratic journalist - a class that also did not escape Hitler's wrath for 'not toeing the party line'," Tanfield said.

Tanfield told The Record of how, when working at the University of Tel Aviv, Israel in 1981, he found himself in awe of survivors with tattoos on their elbows and armpits from concentration camps, and how "they somehow still have their gentleness and compassion. I found that remarkable, as spine chilling as the story is".

Though this is reflected in the oratorio's start, which depicts "a dark, Winter place", representing "the chill of this horror", where everything is lifeless, it ends with a growing spirituality, "hope rising again" as the characters make it to the tranquility of the campground, representing a paradise.

"While linked to the spiritual, Tippett uses all these elements to give a sense of warmth, but also a sense of protest," Tanfield said.