Arts

Series lifts flagging music scene

CONCERT
WA CONSERVATORIUM OF MUSIC
Academy of Performing Arts, May 16
Reviewed by WILLIAM WILCOX

WHAT a much-needed antidote after all the stale orchestral concerts in Perth this month.

The Conservatorium, in its first *Contemporary Music Series* for 1990, bravely gave the WA premieres of two works, which have taken an incredible 50 years and almost 30 years, respectively, to reach us.

John Cage's *Third Construction*, from 1941, genuinely shocked, but as Australia's composer-laureate Peter Sculthorpe says, it is best to shock.

Its unrelenting, pulsating canvas of percussion — an aural Jackson Pollock, if you like — was performed with consummate skill by Gary France, Chris Tarr, Neil Craig and Chris Mallory.

The hypnotic rhythm of the short piece, which evoked the uncompromising but boldly beautiful and beguiling barrage of that almost-forgotten master, Edgar Varese, demanded that the four dance their way round their magical palette. This included tin cans, rattles, claves and lion's roar (also used by Canadian Alexina Louie in her *Music for Heaven and Earth*, premiered by the Toronto Symphony in Perth last week). A conch shell, played by Craig, provided the only non-percussive counterpoint.

This is astonishing music at its absolute abstract. One little boy in the audience was totally entranced by all these seductive colours, dancing to the astounding array of sounds. Programmers of so-called family concerts, please take note!

"Here we are," states Cage. "Let us say 'yes' to our presence together in Chaos." Amen.

Olivier Messiaen's *Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum*, commissioned by Andre Malraux in 1964, was dazzlingly presented by a rainbow-hued orchestra of 50 — wind, brass and percussion, no strings attached — conducted by Anthony Maydwell, who co-conceived the series with fellow lecturer Gary France.

This five-movement, concise masterpiece is, to quote Maydwell, "a microcosm of Messiaenic style". It is quintessential Messiaen, and essential listening, a synthesis of his deep Catholic faith and his great love of nature (the score, of course, features the master's beloved bird calls).

It opens with low winds and guttural brass ("Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O Lord"), its exotic aestheticism literally ascending with fluttering chordal clusters and trembling tuttis, the timeless theme of resurrection that late last century impelled Romantic giants such as Richard Strauss (*Death and Transfiguration)* and Gustav Mahler (his Second Symphony, which will be performed by the WA Symphony Orchestra in the Concert Hall tonight and tomorrow).

The French genius even uses the spaciousness of silence, as Cage has done.

Et exspecto was first performed in France in a chapel and then at Notre Dame. Such genuinely religious, truly inspired (how that word is overused) music could, and should, be performed here in a venue such as St Mary's Cathedral. And, instead of all the annual Bach and Handel, let us share the heavenly visions of Messiaen and his Polish contemporary, Krzysztof Penderecki.

The program (encored last night) opened with Sydney composer Nigel Westlake's *Omphalo Centric Lecture*, a much-ado-about-nothing for two marimbas that simply dissolved into nothingness.

Alas, we will have to wait until October for the second concert in this innovative series.