

Review



PETER J CASEY

Well in tune for all of Westlake

Orchestral Encounters 3: All Westlake. ANU School of Music Orchestra, conducted by Nigel Westlake. Llewellyn Hall, Saturday, October 16.

A CONCERT featuring a composer conducting his own works shouldn't be so rare, but it is. Nigel Westlake has established himself in concert and film music, and, as the 2004 recipient of the H. C. Coombs Creative Arts Fellowship, has been the composer-in-residence at the ANU School of Music since July.

He regularly conducts his own film scores, including those for the *Babe* movies, but Saturday night was his first time at the helm of an all-Westlake concert.

Four members of ANU DRUMatix opened the evening with *Kalabash*, a percussion piece inspired by the balofon music of West Africa. Barely four months old, it set the scene nicely, bringing to mind some of Westlake's earliest works for the Magic Puddin' Band.

Out of the Blue is a string piece dating from 1994. It set up an accented rhythmic drive that, apart from a challenging central section, propelled the piece through to its finish. The ANU Chamber Orchestra attacked its intricacies with confidence and poise.

Two concertos followed, neither completely new, but both extensively revised from original versions. *Shadow Dances* featured guitarist Harold Gretton as soloist, and he extracted fire from his instrument without apparent effort.

Michael Kieran Harvey played Westlake's *Piano Concerto* after the interval, and this was the triumph of the evening. Kieran Harvey's power as a soloist is not due to his staggering technique, nor his unflagging stamina, but to his ability to play brand new works as if they are already staples of the canon.

The School of Music Symphony Orchestra rose to match his playing.

The evening's finale, *Moving Pictures*, presented some of Westlake's film compositions as a concert suite. There were themes from *Babe*, including a nod to Saint-Saens, and some lesser known pieces from *Children of the Revolution*, *Antarctica* and *The Nugget*.

This was a great chance to savour Westlake's work for films. Individual moments were lovely, but the suite is, structurally, not quite at home yet. If it could be played without long breaks (and become, perhaps, a movement or two shorter), it could grow into a technical and stylistic achievement and also a crowd-pleaser.

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