

NEW SOUNDS FROM THE CELLAR

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By Matthew Westwood

A small expansion proves successful at Mudgee's convivial Huntington music festival, writes Matthew Westwood

THE annual Huntington Estate Music Festival ended at the weekend, the first weekend of summer, but in atmosphere and artistic programming, it's all about spring. The countryside around Mudgee, so dry last year, looks fresh and green from recent rain, and wide expanses of Patterson's curse, otherwise a blight on the land, veil the country in a lilac mist.

The festival, for the second year, is hosted by winemaker Tim Stevens with artistic leadership by Carl Vine and Musica Viva, after the final event with Richard Tognetti and the Australian Chamber Orchestra in 2005. The convivial atmosphere of music-making, food and company is unchanged, and new management has injected fresh thinking about repertoire and presentation. Stevens has added about 40 extra seats to the concert space in the Huntington cellar, making room for 490 people. It is, he says, the biggest attendance at the festival.

Most appropriately for a spring festival, which started last Wednesday, Huntington 2007 is about contemporary composition, with the world premieres of new quartets by Vine and Peter Sculthorpe, performed by the Goldner String Quartet. Both works were commissioned for the Goldners by the remarkable nonagenarian Ken Tribe, Musica Viva's patron.

Huntington, like other chamber music festivals, is an opportunity to hear familiar artists in unfamiliar surroundings, and to be introduced to new musicians. Word was already getting around last week about the young Russian violinist Alina Ibragimova, making her Australian debut in Mudgee. On Friday evening she performed Beethoven's Spring sonata with such crispness that it sounded freshly picked. Phrases were punctuated emphatically and she used a slightly dry, rather than sweet or syrupy tone. So natural was her delivery that interpretation never got in the way of the music. She worked hard at the weekend, leading with authority Brahms's second sextet and beautifully unpacking the intricacies of Bach's second violin sonata in A minor. Audiences around the country will next year have the opportunity to hear her in concert with the ACO. Vine calls her an ingenue: a natural musician who "exhales music".

"It isn't effortless, she works 18 hours a day," he says. "In fact, the musicians here who are working with her through the festival are a bit astonished: she just wants to play and play and play. If she ever feels like she doesn't want to play any more music, her solution is to play a bit more until the feeling passes."

The other outstanding international guest was the American pianist Elizabeth Schumann, Ibragimova's partner in the Beethoven sonata. Schumann gave the Australian premiere of Vine's third piano sonata -- she had commissioned the work after winning a competition with Vine's second sonata -- in which she pounced at the keyboard like a tigress.

Teddy Tahu Rhodes, fresh from his operatic triumphs in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Dead Man Walking*, appeared in song recitals, and it was a treat to hear him in a more intimate setting than the opera theatre. I remain to be convinced by Rhodes when he sings Schubert, but his singing of Graeme Koehne's *Three Poems of Byron* left me spellbound by his sensitivity to text and music.

The festival program is best enjoyed as a degustation menu: a series of carefully planned, contrasting courses. There was variety in instrumental texture -- from solo violin, to piano, percussion and string sextet -- as well as in musical forms and countries of origin. Music by French composer Jean Francaix -- Gallic and effervescent -- was given an airing, along with chamber staples by Beethoven and Brahms.

With the prominence given to contemporary composition, there were grumbles from some in the audience. Vine is unapologetic, and he cites Tribe, a former head of *Musica Viva*, that an artistic planner must follow and lead audience expectations.

"It's an incredibly sensible directive," Vine says. "People know what they like, but they only know what they know. If you don't give them something new, they don't have the option of expanding. This is a very mild expansion (into new repertoire), if you think of all the festivals in the world. There's none of the harsh complexist music in there."

Particularly enjoyable was Brisbane composer Robert Davidson's *Above Ground*, originally a percussion concerto whose arrangement for chamber forces - the two percussion soloists from Karak, with the Australian String Quartet and pianist Benjamin Martin -- had its first performance on Saturday. Karak's Kevin Man says the piece could describe the view from a hang-glider, and it has the exhilaration such a view suggests. A terrific party piece, its chugging rhythms recall the energetic music of John Adams.

Sculthorpe's 17th string quartet had its premiere on Thursday night and I didn't hear it, but it was evidently a crowd-pleaser. The composer regards the number as auspicious, because Beethoven also wrote 17 quartets, if the *Grosse Fuge* is included. Vine says this work is more melodic than Sculthorpe's other essays in the genre.

"He has taken a Beethoven theme from the 17th quartet, and used that as the basis for his quartet," Vine says. "I think he is reclining into tonality. It never gets violently rhythmic, but the more gentle parts of it remind me of (Sculthorpe's) *Small Town*. It has a comforting sensibility to it."

Vine says he is uncomfortable about programming his own music in a festival where he is artistic director, but Stevens requested it. So along with quartets by Nigel Westlake and Richard Mills, and the new works by Sculthorpe and Davidson, were two quartets from Vine and his third piano sonata.

Before the premiere of his fifth quartet, Vine told the audience that there was no melody or theme, only that it was dedicated to the "finer side of humanity". It is cast as a single movement with clear sections that summon different musical cultures from around the world, suggesting music's universality. It began with a slow chorale-like theme, and moved through sections that called to mind, variously, Spanish guitar music and folk fiddle. Only in the middle

sections of this optimistic and enthusiastically received work did the music occasionally lose focus.

As I listened to this, and to Vine's other works on the program, it struck me what a musical chameleon he can be. A constant, however, is the improvisatory quality he gives to solo parts, whether it be to the violinist in a quartet, or a pianist.

His third piano sonata is in four sections, again performed as a single movement. It opens with Messiaen-like chords, and moves into a fantasia with the mood of a nocturne. A dynamic, rhythmic middle section leads to a tremendous finale.

Schumann is an exciting pianist and Vine could surely not have asked for a better exponent of the work: he leaped on to the stage to congratulate her. There were other fine performances: of Francaix from the New Sydney Wind Quintet, Martin's reading of Debussy, Spanish guitarist Jorge Campano and band, and the fine Goldner players in different combinations. Particularly enjoyable was Shostakovich's Piano Trio No. 2 in E minor with Schumann, Ibragimova and cellist Rachel Johnston, a perfect Huntington experience, of the kind this audience loves and expects.

The 2007 festival was the first that could be organised with a full year of planning, following the hasty arrangements last year. Stevens says that, with the good attendances, he will break even. "This year is more the way we want to do it," he says. "This time it's a full festival with the concerts and talks, and people enjoying themselves."

Musica Viva is planning to expand as a festival organiser. Next October, it will host a five-day chamber music festival in Sydney. It will include resident ensembles, younger players from the Australian Youth Orchestra and visiting international artists, including pianist Angela Hewitt performing both books of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, and the Juilliard String Quartet. "It's something that has been talked about by (Musica Viva's) board and the chairmen for many years," Vine says. "It's not market driven, it's an estimate of market need. There is no chamber music festival in Sydney, and there should be."

Although the Sydney festival will be a different experience from Huntington, Vine and the Musica Viva team have this week shown that presenting a stimulating and enjoyable festival is a natural extension of their fine concert series.

Matthew Westwood attended the festival as a guest of Huntington Estate and Musica Viva Australia.