

# Not for the faint of heart

Chinese composer Tan Dun wrote his *Water Passion* as a tribute to Bach's masterpiece which was performed the previous Sunday at the Perth International Arts Festival.

The text was stripped back to the bare essentials, giving it even more power than the original. Tan Dun used a variety of compositional techniques and sophisticated multi-media effects to deepen the emotional impact of the words. The chorus played an important role in advancing the dramatic tensions.

Gone were the reflective chorales of Bach: here there was a gutsy concentration on the story itself.

It is a less spiritual work, for it sets out to express the events colorfully in a way that is relevant to the 21st century.

The stage was dominated by a cruciform arrangement of 17 transparent water bowls illuminated from below.

The women of the chorus were arranged in the upper left quadrant with the men to the right. Dressed in black, they sat at individual lecterns, reminiscent of monks in a medieval monastery.

The percussionists and the conductor were placed at the end points of the cross, while the vocal and string soloists were arranged in the two front quadrants. There was a simple power in the physical arrangement which suggested that antiphonal effects were to be a feature of the work.

That proved to be the case, with the men and women choristers tossing motifs back and forth across the divide.

The chorus excelled itself in the strange idiom which at times required mumbling, harmonic singing, rhythmic ostinati and the playing of tiny finger cymbals. Their movements were heavily stylised and their arm movements had a hypnotic effect at times. Utter control was paramount in the stately quiet

opera in review

perth

WATER PASSION  
AFTER ST MATTHEW  
(Tan Dun)  
Perth International Arts Festival  
Conductor ..... Sarah Ioannides  
Soprano ..... Elizabeth Keutsch  
Bass ..... Stephen Bryant  
Violin ..... Gloria Justen  
Cello ..... Wendy Sutter  
Percussion:  
David Cossin, Tim White,  
Paul Tanner  
Electronic Sampler .... Yuanlin Chen  
Western Australian Opera Chorus  
Perth Concert Hall  
Sunday, February 20

singing in the first sections, especially in the repetitive Someone is shouting in the desert, which had a long gradual crescendo and very rapid words.

The first half was divided into four sections, Baptism, Temptation, Last Supper and In the Garden of Gethsemane. The Temptation movement was spectacular with the bass required to sing melismatically over more than two octaves from C below the staff.

The soprano took the role of the Devil tempting Jesus with grotesque vocal distortions rocketing into stratospheric heights. The chorus interrupted with single word exclamations and vocalised sound effects. It was word painting taken to extreme lengths, especially at the word "fire."

The chorus A sound is heard in Water required melodious singing, slides, whispers, and heavily syncopated rhythms. When the chorus burst into conventional four-part harmony, the effect was extremely powerful.

It was at this point that

the percussionists played with the water bowls nearest them, producing an extraordinary range of delicate sounds, in a tonal palette never heard before in the Perth Concert Hall.

*Water Passion* could be seen as a massive duet for male and female soloists, with the chorus adding commentary and sound effects. Both singers required phenomenal vocal control, with the bass having to produce Buddhist overtone singing, changing smoothly from very deep melismatic phrases to high tones without interrupting the musical flow.

Stephen Bryant managed it all with no appearance of tension.

The soprano had a most ungrateful score to sing. At times Elizabeth Keutsch sounded like a Tourette Syndrome sufferer as she suddenly squawked into ultra high notes and babbled seemingly incomprehensibly.

These moments were interspersed with gloriously warm singing; but one wonders what the long term effect will be on her lovely natural voice. A superb vocal actress, she sailed over the difficulties of the score with disarming ease.

In the second half, there was an overpowering sense of drama as the trial was acted out, followed by the demands for the release of Barabbas and then the crucifixion. The composer's close attention to the words allowed the story to unfold clearly. Congratulations to all the singers for their clear diction in such an uncomplaining musical idiom. The drama was superbly realised.

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*Water Passion* is not for the faint hearted. It requires concentrated attention from the audience who must be willing to open their ears to unconventional music making.

The chorus alone made it worthwhile, with their spectacularly well controlled vocal technique and disciplined movements.

They played their part in making this a memorable piece of music theatre, not just a static oratorio. In this respect, *Water Passion* was an appropriate foil for Lindy Hume's dramatised *St Matthew Passion* the previous week.

— ALAN TRUE