

Review: A Flowering Tree

Jennie Fitzhardinge March 9, 2009 - 10:36AM
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A Flowering Tree did not quite bloom as hoped.

A Flowering Tree
Music by John Adams
Conducted by Stefan Asbury

American contemporary classical music composer John Adams is so renowned, leading orchestras around the world will commit to performing his works on the basis of his reputation alone.

So securing the Australian premiere of his latest opera [A Flowering Tree](#) was quite a coup for the [Perth International Arts Festival](#). It was also an opportunity to showcase local talent of the WASO, WA Opera and local video, sound and production designers.

The opera was commissioned for the New Crowned Hope Festival in Vienna to celebrate the 250th anniversary of Mozart's birth in 2006. Taking Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute* as his inspiration, Adams found a Southern Indian folktale – the flowering tree – that similarly uses magic, transformation and the healing power of love as its themes.

The opera is for three voices, the Storyteller (baritone Sanford Sylvan), Kumudha (soprano Rachelle Durkin) and the Prince (tenor Russell Thomas). In this production the orchestra and choir are centre stage with the action taking place on an elevated stage behind the orchestra or around the edges.

Stage designer Bryan Woltjen draped two white banner curtains down the full height of the Concert Hall from which the singers would emerge, retreat behind or be framed

by. Video footage by Mic Gruchy was projected on to this curtain, creating an intimacy that might have been missing without it.

Adams' score was complex, occasionally challenging and often beautiful and the performances of the singers, orchestra and choir could not be faulted.

However, operas are about stories and it is in this area that *A Flowering Tree* didn't bloom for me.

The story is well-suited to an opera: the heroine Kumudha has the power to transform herself into a flowering tree which she does so that she and her sister can sell the flowers to help their ageing mother. When a prince spies on her transformation, he decides to make her his wife and somehow own her power. In spite of this bad beginning the young couple fall in love, cruel fate drives them apart, until they are reunited and made whole again.

The libretto is based on a translation and often it sounds like the phrasing has come straight from sanskrit with words chosen for the accuracy, not their appropriateness. Its awkwardness was cringeworthy in places and I found myself wishing Adams had worked with a dramaturg to get the story moving as fluidly as the music.

Nonetheless, when the performance concluded on Friday most of the audience responded enthusiastically and elicited three curtain calls.