



Beauty and magic blossom in Adams's arbour of love

OPERA

A Flowering Tree

By John Adams. Perth Concert Hall
March 7.

THE Perth International Arts Festival saved the best until last, concluding its high quality music program with John Adams's magical opera *A Flowering Tree*.

Premiered in Vienna in late 2006 and performed in several key centres since, it was something of a coup for the festival and its collaborators, the West Australian Symphony Orchestra and the West Australian Opera, to get this important work to Perth so soon.

Based on an Indian fable, it tells the story of a young girl who magically transforms into a flowering tree at will. She finds love but is mutilated and abandoned by a jealous sister-in-law before finally being restored by her husband's devotion.

The themes of love and transformation inspired Adams to create some of his most beautiful music.

His mastery of orchestral colour and texture is evident throughout this sumptuous score, and his evocation of the sensuous, the magical and the heroic is as brilliant and as sharply focused as one finds in Wagner.

The lyricism of his writing for solo voice is perhaps not as consistently appealing, exacerbated at times by the unpoetic translation, yet Adams exploits vocal range and colour to great effect and his consummate word-setting ensures the text is clearly heard.

This semi-staged production was a tri-

umph of design and function.

With the orchestra centre stage, the singers sang from the sides and front and on a raised platform at the rear.

A tall, narrow video screen, softened by sheer curtaining, reflected subtle images, overlaid with live footage of the musicians.

Director Patrick Nolan, with Mic Gruchy, Matthew Marshall and Bryan Woltjen, created an appealing, softly lit space, a perfect match for the pared back drama of the work.

All three soloists gave outstanding performances. Soprano Rachele Durkin was a captivating presence, both physically and vocally, gliding effortlessly across a vast range and impressing with her clear, pure top register. Tenor Russell Thomas, for whom the role was written, sang with a thrilling full-voiced intensity, while baritone Sanford Sylvan took a lighter-toned approach as the storyteller, bringing an engaging warmth to the role. Stefan Asbury conducted with considerable attention to detail, skilfully guiding the performers through the music's rhythmic complexities.

The WA Opera chorus was generally solid and the WA Symphony Orchestra played with conviction and, at times, some flair.

This exceptional work and fine production deserve to be seen across the country.

Mark Coughlan