

Hail and farewell to composer of distinction

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The end of the decade also brought the end of an era with the death of Richard Meale (1932-2009), a major figure of the post-World War II era and one of the most significant composers this country has produced.

Meale achieved a distinctive voice by embracing rather than rejecting European modernism. He leaves behind a diverse generation of Australian composers, less preoccupied with identity and nationhood than in the last century, and can take some credit for Australia's broader artistic and intellectual outlook. Ave atque vale.

Australia's big arts organisations have all, more or less, moved into positive mode if one makes allowance for the inherently conservative forces that drive their agendas.

The Sydney Symphony has emerged from the stagnation of the Gelmetti years with some fine new recordings, a positive spirit and a recent Asian tour under its belt. It plays superbly with its new, likeable conductor, Vladimir Ashkenazy, who is physically diminutive but musically gargantuan.

However, it still has to find ways of keeping up orchestral discipline in between his visits. Some aspects of the orchestra, notably its recruitment of new talent, have not developed much since Edo de Waart was chief conductor.

Ashkenazy started his tenure as chief conductor and artistic adviser with a witty and joyous contribution to the Mendelssohn bicentenary - a rare chance to hear his *A Midsummer Night's Dream* music in the context of a performance of Shakespeare's play. Yannick Nezet-Seguin returned with more of the stylish Haydn and carefully crafted Bruckner that made his first visit so memorable. A thought-provoking Prokofiev Festival, with an outstanding performance of the Fifth Symphony, ended the year.

Opera Australia showed signs of emerging from a different and more acute problem of leadership and direction with the appointment of Lyndon Terracini as artistic director. But the challenges of broadening the repertoire, finding more adventurous audiences and opening up this hugely expensive art form to new currents are enormous.

The operatic performance of the year was Stuart Skelton's wild, mystical and rebarbative *Peter Grimes* (Britten). The company chose some directors of outstanding artistic maturity and quality: Neil Armfield in *Grimes*, Graeme Murphy in a delightful and lightly irreverent *Aida*, and Jim Sharman in a brilliant, brittle and stylish *Così*.

The October visit by the London Philharmonic, with its distinctive, balletic and charismatic chief conductor Vladimir Jurowski, violinist Vadim Repin and pianist Jean-Yves Thibaudet provided a thrilling lift to the local orchestral scene, with some superb Wagner, Brahms and Ravel.

The Australian Chamber Orchestra marked Richard Tognetti's 20 years with the orchestra with a series of commissioned curtain raisers. (All were from men, which is strange in this day and age: the Australia Ensemble, celebrating its 30th birthday, avoided such a faux pas with a witty contribution from Elena Kats-Chernin.) After a previous cancelled visit, the ACO

managed to present the wonderfully sophisticated and elastic expressiveness of American soprano Dawn Upshaw.

After another American tour the ACO does more than any other organisation for the profile of Australian music overseas, yet at the local level, no one matches the audience pull of the Australian Brandenburg Orchestra, which repeats each program five or six times. This year the orchestra welcomed a distinguished new leader, Rachel Beesley. Her sense of line and phrase is an effective counterfoil to conductor Paul Dyer's spikiness.

The legendary Latvian violinist Gidon Kremer started Musica Viva's year with his chamber orchestra, Kremerata Baltica, which shares the flexibility of stylistic mix of the ACO. Among string quartets, Sydney welcomed the traditional supreme mastery of the Tokyo Quartet and the Kronos Quartet, which pushed boundaries in Jon Rose's *Music for Four Fences*, played on portable frames stretched with barbed wire.

Also pushing boundaries was the intrepid Ensemble Offspring in a concert of spectral music in May and Stockhausen later on. **The year's three best moments were the superb dance collaboration by the Song Company to music by Gesualdo under Roland Peelman, old and recent electronic works by Stockhausen at the mid-year *Licht* Festival, and Stephen Kovacevich's *Diabelli Variations* at the City Recital Hall late in the year.**

The best recordings by an Australian artist were Roger Woodward's Debussy *Preludes* and Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* with the American label Celestial Harmonies.

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