

Rites Of Passage

Fitter's Workshop, May 8, 8pm

Sun In Me: A concert to celebrate Peter Sculthorpe's 80th Birthday
National Portrait Gallery, May 7, 6pm

Lying in bed as I've been going to sleep over the last few nights," Peter Sculthorpe says, "I've been thinking; maybe it's one of my very best pieces." He was speaking about Friday's performance of his *Rites of Passage*, and judging by the atmosphere on the night, Canberra's concert-going public seems to think he might be right.

The evening was a rare combination of committed presentation, wonderful music and an almost palpable engagement from the audience. The result was that *Rites of Passage* – the centrepiece of Sculthorpe's substantial involvement in this month's Canberra International Music Festival – felt like it may have been one of those precious moments in which we are aware of watching the artistic life of a city step up a notch.

Sculthorpe is widely regarded as Australia's most prominent composer, although he says he tries not to think about it like that – "I still think of myself as the person I was in my 20s. If I thought about it, it would probably go to my head. I just feel very humble." Born in Launceston, Tasmania on April 29, 1929, he has just celebrated his 80th birthday. He has been at the forefront of Australian cultural life for most of those 80 years; he has been made an officer of the Order of Australia and awarded an OBE, declared an Australian living treasure, and even been the subject of an Archibald Prize-winning portrait by Eric Smith in 1982.

His *Rites of Passage*, for choir and orchestra, is an opera written in 1972-73. Although as the composer points out, it is an opera in the 17th century sense, and so bears less resemblance to 19th century opera than we are used to. "Originally I was commissioned to write a work for the opening of the Opera House, and originally it was to be an opera with Patrick White, but we had so many problems that the friendship came to an end."

He tried working with other librettists but couldn't find anything he was satisfied with. Eventually the date for completion came and went, so the work was not performed at the 1973 opening. He eventually compiled the libretto himself; in Latin drawn from the sixth century Roman philosopher Boethius, and from poems in Arrernte – an indigenous Australian language. The work alternates between chorales in the Latin, and rites in Arrernte.

"The chorales are about permanence, and the rites are dynamic; concerning the cycles of life," Sculthorpe says. "I wanted to juxtapose the passage of life with the permanence of the planet, and of heavenly bodies."

In pursuit of this aim, he says that the work is underpinned by three symbolic musical building blocks: the note C, which stands for purity, God and love. E, which stands for eternity, and A flat with a G above it, which stands for Earth.

The work was performed 18 times at the Sydney Opera House, and seven at the Adelaide Festival in 1974. But the score was so difficult to prepare that until Friday night it had not been performed in the intervening 35 years. "In the early '70s we all thought we were very smart, writing music in time-space notation [where instead of using conventional rhythms, the duration of the notes is written in seconds and portrayed visually]. It turned out to be very difficult to

A celebration of Sculthorpe

The 80th birthday of one of Australia's most iconic composers has been marked in grand style, Harry White writes



read, and so we had to re-notate it. Because there were no computers in the decades following *Rites of Passage* I just put it in a drawer and almost forgot about it."

The concert began with the audience being led by candlelight from the Glassworks to the Fitter's Workshop, which was lit by an eerie orange light. As silence settled the work opened in brooding druidic character; the low strings, complemented by a soft dissonance in the choir, creating an almost druidic atmosphere.

As the work unfolded crescendos of percussion gave way to the rites, and then the music would settle back into the chorales. Waves of crescendos and wonderfully loud noise – it is so important for classical music to be loud sometimes – gave way to shimmering delicate choral textures. By the end of the work these cycles had done what Sculthorpe set out to do – provide a wonderful sense of the balance between flux and permanence, and communicate these ideas on a massive scale.

All of this is not to say the

performance was perfect – the choir was too dependent on volume for confidence, and not always 100 per cent convincing. And some of the mixing for pre-recorded percussion effects could have been more subtle, to say the least.

However, one of the great strengths of the performance was that it was presented with such commitment. There is no lacking of polish in the classical music of Canberra or the wider world. That is not to say we should dispense with virtuosity, just that it is not enough to make a concert wonderful. What made this concert wonderful, in conjunction with the music, was the sense of theatre and occasion which the organisers create. This is important, because it reminds you that you are there to listen to something special, and to engage with the music – which is exactly what happened.

Two other things which should not be passed over are the performances by conductor Roland Peelman and cellist Patrick Murphy. Peelman's combination of energy and precision was exciting to watch, and Murphy's performance of Sculthorpe's *Threnody* for solo cello, performed in the middle of the work, was entrancing.

The space itself was spectacular. "It was in the *Threnody* that you could hear the acoustics of the hall," Sculthorpe says. "Hearing a solo cello in the Fitter's Workshop is better than hearing it in the Melbourne Recital Centre." The space not only sounded great, it looked fantastic.

Another excellent space used during the Festival was the National Portrait Gallery, on Thursday night for *Sun in Me*, a concert to celebrate Sculthorpe's birthday. It was a visually lovely place to host this concert of works from throughout Sculthorpe's life, including a new version of *How the Stars were Born* and the premiere of his song cycle *Sun*.

The performance as a whole benefited from the strong sense of cohesion that performing the works of a single composer can bring, and the overall effect was wonderful. The song cycle – *Sun* – is full of lovely writing; Sculthorpe's gently dissonant harmonic language lends this music the feeling of the mixed blessing of a sunlight but cold autumn afternoon. The performance from Alan Hicks on piano was sensible but very elegant, and soprano Mina Kanaridis' singing and sympathy for the music were lovely, particularly in the opening of the last song. But the difference in control between her middle and upper registers was a little alarming.

The performance of the evening was The Tinalley Quartet's performance of an arrangement of *Irkanda 4*, which the composer originally put together for the Kronos Quartet. According to Sculthorpe they gave the "most passionate performance" of this work he has ever seen – and it was wonderful. They were balanced and sympathetic, and with their guidance the work was extremely evocative.

The thing the two performances share was a strong sense of how worthwhile and wonderful the business of presenting music to the public is – and that is why, along with the quality of the music, they were so successful. But after the wonderful performances of this festival, Sculthorpe has an idea for how Canberra can continue on an upward musical trajectory: "I would like to see the CSO become Australia's national symphony orchestra."

That doesn't sound like a bad idea.



Peter Sculthorpe, top, talking to audience members after a concert and, above with conductor Roland Peelman and the Combined Grammar Schools Motet Choir. Photos: Charles White