

Power and Paradise

personified in the WPO's first 2019 concert

The opening concert for the Woollahra Philharmonic Orchestra's 2019 season, led by its chief conductor, the highly experienced Lee Bracegirdle, was an absolute delight and sets a very high bar for the rest of the year. Aptly named Power and Paradise, the WPO played to a full house at both concerts, mesmerising, enchanting and thrilling the assembled crowd.

The programme started with Mozart's Symphony No 41 in C major, also known as the Jupiter Symphony. This is the longest and regarded by many as his finest symphony and follows the traditional form of four movements. Sadly, it was also his last, being written in 1788, three years before his death. With a work of this length, it is always a challenge to keep the orchestra all together, but Lee Bracegirdle was more than up to the task, conducting his orchestra through all the complexity of this work without a score to which to refer. The orchestra, ably led by Rob Nijs, responded to the challenge and enthusiastically took the audience through the fanfares, flourishes and fugato of this beautiful work.

The second piece was a short work by Delius, entitled Walk to the Paradise Garden. Originally this was an interlude in the opera 'A Village Romeo and Juliet', but is now a popular stand-alone work. However, despite its title, it is not a dreamy vision of strolling through a bucolic heaven, as the Paradise Garden is actually a pub. In the opera, it is where the lovers meet and finally decide to do away with themselves – hardly a carefree stroll! The music reflected the tempestuous nature of the quandary facing the lovers, and the orchestra's performance was a fitting realisation of the Paradise in the concert's title.

If the second piece was Paradise, the third and final piece was all Power. Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto No 2 in C minor is considered one of the finest ever written, and one of the most difficult to play, and in the Sydney Conservatorium's Phillip Shovk (pictured below), the WPO had a master concert pianist to showcase a masterpiece. The first movement starts off with a series of dramatic, unaccompanied piano chords, before becoming a maelstrom of different themes alternating between the over/

piano and orchestra, ending in a swirling crescendo. The second and third movements followed in similar form, the music spinning between orchestra and piano, andante and prestissimo, and culminating in the final movement's finale, with the pianist playing at such speed it was impossible to see his fingers move. Shovk's performance was superb, and it is a credit to the orchestra that they supported him so ably. The audience were overwhelmed and brought Shovk back for two encores, the first a piece by Scarlatti and the second one of his own compositions. This was a performance to be remembered by all and marks a major milestone for the WPO.

For an orchestra of local, unpaid musicians, there is nothing amateurish about the WPO's performances. The orchestra now has over 50 members of all ages and includes gifted amateurs, students and professional musicians, all with a passion for music and bringing it to Woollahra residents. If you haven't been to a performance, you really should think about going.



Rosemary McDonald

