



Tsunami-inspired work finds favour

MUSIC MELBOURNE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA: MASTER SERIES 6

Hamer Hall, August 16, program will be repeated tonight at 8pm.
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Clive O'Connell Reviewer

WHILE in Melbourne, American conductor Carl St Clair is directing the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra in two programs: this weekend he leads the Master Series No. 6; next Friday and Saturday, the Monash/Classical Connections double. At the start of each set, St Clair conducts a short work commissioned by his Pacific Symphony in Orange County and now aired for the first time in Australia.

On Thursday, we heard Narong Prangcharoen's *Sattha* for strings, piano and percussion, commemorating the tsunami of December 2004, which devastated parts of South-East Asia, including the composer's native Thailand.

St Clair is clearly proud of this commission; his introductory commentary lasted almost as long as the work itself. It presents easily perceptible musical images associated with the massive geological disturbance and its doleful aftermath. The score uses its limited palette with a keen eye for emotional impact,

leader Wilma Smith's violin and associate principal Sarah Morse's cello outlining two plangent melodic lines before Prangcharoen sets up a wide-spectrum, powerful veil of sound that dies away to funereal gong strokes. For a two-year-old piece, *Sattha* found clear favour with the generally conservative taste of Master series patrons.

Pieter Wispelwey took to the solo line in Walton's Cello Concerto with his usual gusto and that attractive performance style of engaging the audience with his eyes; not for him the usual curve over and engrossed address to his instrument alone. The work has become a rarity on programs in this city, perhaps because of its rigour which puts the vibrant cello main voice and escorting orchestra through a robust sequence of challenges, notably in the central Allegro, which whips past with the composer's trademark wit.

Wispelwey gave a reasoned account of the outer movements, lending a gentle urbanity to the ambling first segment and responding with impressive mastery to the abrupt alterations of attack and emotional landscape in the finale variations. He rose to finer heights in the generous cadenzas strategically placed throughout the score; in fact, the concerto made its mark chiefly in these

passages where the soloist performed with his individual brand of sonorous virtuosity.

◀ The pick of the performance came in the scherzo's horn trio. ▶

After interval, St Clair and the MSO accounted for Beethoven's *E flat Symphony*, the *Eroica*, with a crispness and strikingly light aggression characteristic of superior American interpretations of grime-encrusted war-horses. The conductor refrained from imposing rhetorical elongations of metre or over-emphasis on offbeat chords or disjunct rhythms. As a result, the effect proved to be unusually volatile and positive, even in the great funeral march which St Clair treated with careful mobility.

The MSO sounded in top form for this symphony, familiar territory, but brought out a resonant vigour from the cellos and basses with both sets of violins almost straining at the bit during the voluble outer movements.

Still, the pick of the performance came in the scherzo's horn trio — one of the most exposed passages in the Classical symphonic repertoire for this group — carried off with an infectious and reliable evenness of delivery.