

Classical shuns the starch



Orchestra Wellington is banishing the stiff image of concert-going, and introducing a new generation to the delights of the genre. **Sadie Beckman** reports.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRADLEY GARNER

Santino Condratov, Arohanui Strings-Sistema Hutt Valley



'We're not elitist. We want to bring new people to classical music - this amazing world we live in.'

MARC TADDEI, MUSICAL DIRECTOR

Collars are loosened and stiff upper lips smile broadly in the foyers at Orchestra Wellington's latest performances. Pre-concert, music-lovers sit drinking and chatting as a jazz trio plays background music near the bar. Attire is casual and ages vary widely.

During the show itself, joyful laughter and clapping ring out in the previously silent interludes between musical movements. Even the conductor banters with the audience, acknowledging their applause and smiling. Gone are the disapproving hushes and stiff formality that many people associate with orchestral concerts. Here, instead, is an orchestra that has managed to bring the profound beauty of classical music to the masses.

Orchestra Wellington is the oldest city-based orchestra in the country. The current incarnation began in 2013, but the Wellington Regional Orchestra Foundation has presented concerts for more than 60 years in the region, under different monikers, starting off as the Alex Lindsay String Orchestra in 1948, and being known as both the Wellington Sinfonia and Vector Wellington Orchestra before adopting their modern persona.

Proud of the classical history they bring to the stage, but with a foot firmly in the modern world, the organisation is a large part of Wellington's culture and arts scene, including presenting subscription series concerts, family and educational performances and an increasing array of outreach and community development projects.

Orchestra Wellington also provides the soundtrack for some of New Zealand's most prestigious performing companies, including the Royal New Zealand Ballet, NZ Opera and the Orpheus Choir. These talented classical musicians play for up to 100,000 people a year, which shows the level of renown that travels with them wherever they go.

And now, as their 2016 season approaches, Orchestra Wellington is also reflecting on the one drawing to an end.

Six By One, a series of half a dozen concerts showcasing all of Tchaikovsky's symphonies and featuring top New Zealand pianist Michael Houstoun, was the orchestra's biggest season yet, says Musical Director Marc Taddei.

"These symphonies are one of the monuments of the 19th century and it's extremely rare to hear them all done in one season," he adds.

The concertos represent the height of the Russian Romantic movement and proved extremely popular with Wellington audiences, who are coming to appreciate the relaxed style that Marc brings to the stage.

"I talk to the audience. We're not elitist. We want to bring new people to classical music - this amazing world we live in," he says.

"We really look like we're having fun on stage because we are, and that's what it's all about."

General Manager Adán Tijerina says Six By One helped Orchestra Wellington to ride a wave of popularity that has seen ticket sales surge and local music-lovers demonstrate "faith in what the orchestra does".

As 2016 draws near, that faith is demonstrated by a

tantalising promotion - tickets offered at a fraction of the usual price, \$18 rather than \$60, but with the details of the programme and the names of the soloists kept secret.

Adán compares the scheme with the popular Air New Zealand Mystery Breaks promotion, where people didn't know their destination when buying heavily reduced fares.

"I think our track record proves that we will deliver them a programme and soloists they want to hear, and [starting] at \$18 a ticket, it is not a huge gamble for them," he says.

"Obviously, price is a factor when people want to engage with the arts, but we're curious to know how much the soloists and programme serve as motivators as well."

At the orchestra's performance of Providence in early November, details of the soloists were revealed but the programme remained a secret, and more tickets went on sale at the slightly higher price of \$25.

Details of the latest teaser will be released at the official 2016 season launch and final concert of the year on December 5. Phase three of the plan then kicks in: a subscription offer that is priced slightly higher again, but still cheaper than the full price of \$60 a concert. This begins on April 01.

The closing-night concert will also feature the premiere of a piece called Melting Furniture for Piano and Orchestra, written by Orchestra Wellington's outgoing Composer in Residence Karlo Margetić. He is one of three who have called the orchestra home in recent years, and enjoys a reputation as one of our up-and-coming classical musical composers. At



LEFT PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:
 Marc Taddei, Music Director; Paul Altomari,
 Section Principal Double Bass; Alison
 Eldridge, Programme Director Arohanui
 Strings-Sistema Hutt Valley

THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
 Julian Kirgan, Sub-Principal Trombone;
 Barbara Asara, Arohanui Strings-Sistema
 Hutt Valley, with First Violin Jonathan
 Tanner;
 Arohanui Strings-Sistema Hutt Valley
 with Orchestra Wellington;
 Rupa Maitra, Sandra Logan, Helen Weir,
 Hye-Won Kim, First Violins



just 28 years old, Karlo has degrees in composition and clarinet from the New Zealand School of Music, and will be Composer in Residence with the Auckland Philharmonia Orchestra for 2016-17.

Adán Tijerina is happy that more people will get to hear gems such as Margetić's work, and believes the subscription idea has itself brought in those who perhaps wouldn't have taken the plunge otherwise, because cheaper seats mean it's not such a big deal if you miss a performance.

"Even if people do have to miss, they give away their tickets to friends or neighbours, which gets more people in."

Often, he says, the newbies enjoy it so much they end up coming back as customers in their own right.

Marc Taddei endorses widening the fan base.

"Elasticity in pricing is something we have been looking at, and this way even if people can't make every concert, they can have someone else go in their place under the same subscription."

These initiatives, says Adán, mean the hard-working management team behind Wellington's oldest orchestra can gather vital information about the way people value classical music concerts, as well as attracting new audience members and offering a marketing programme with an element of excitement and risk – exactly the concepts the musicians strive to communicate in the music itself.

Adán recalls a family group he spotted at the third concert of 2015, which affirmed his belief in introducing new ears to the joy of classical music.

"The choir stalls behind the orchestra are ones we sell cheap and often in the last two days before a concert," he says.

"I remember seeing a man up there with his two boys. One was lying down with his head on his dad, listening to the music. The other was cuddled up on the other side.

"People don't have to sit formally or at attention, and it's great to see kids there. You might get a very rare complaint from a more traditional audience-member that non-traditional behaviour is distracting, but most [of the audience] are beaming."

Opening people's eyes to the thrill of classical music remains a motivating factor throughout the orchestra's other activities too.

A partnership with Cubadupa festival organisers provides

free outdoor performances, which the orchestra also does as part of the iconic NZ Festival, and their Music To Schools outreach sees a small ensemble of musicians travel around the district, mostly to lower-decile schools, to play classical music for many children who have never experienced it before. Funded by the Wellington Region Amenities Fund, the project is aimed at children with little or no musical exposure.

"The kids are usually blown away," says Adán.

"They especially love the brass instruments because they're loud and dynamic. The musicians play some songs the kids know too, like Taylor Swift, that kind of thing."

In 2013, Orchestra Wellington established a school holiday programme in Lower Hutt, in partnership with a group called Arohanui Strings, based on a learning model called Sistema, the Venezuelan Youth Orchestra's scheme for "learning music, achieving excellence and working for inclusion and social justice for marginalised, vulnerable children".

While Arohanui Strings itself works as a growing charitable trust and has provided a free after-school music education service for the past three years, the partnership with Orchestra Wellington was designed to increase resources during the school holidays and maintain important continuity in the programme.

According to the Arohanui Strings website, Sistema's goal is "to help children in high-deprivation neighbourhoods to reach their full potential, using teamwork, harmony and ensemble playing". Each child in the programme is provided with an instrument and professional instruction for two to four days a week, two hours at a time after school. The discipline of learning an instrument, says the site, and the experience of playing music together transforms lives, helping children to become a positive force in their community.

And who knows – with the opportunity given to them to appreciate classical music at a young age, some of those children might soon join the many younger adults who now turn up in droves to Orchestra Wellington's concert performances.

Better still, a few years on they might be sitting on the stage bringing to life a musical form that has thrilled millions of people for centuries. **f**

