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Thank you, Marc Taddei

by Ian Dando

The Christchurch Symphony music director delivers a breathtaking farewell concert.

It took Marc Taddei only one year as music director and chief conductor of the Christchurch Symphony to turn repertoire and public taste on its head. Orpheus and Bacchus blew him here. The new works he introduced in his first two years alone surpassed the total in the orchestra's history. All his substantial legacy to Christchurch has radiated out from this innovative ebullience; the perfect tonic when previous programmers had given the orchestra bedsores by locking the players into stale stuff for years. His typical American ability to break down formal barriers through friendly chat enabled him to take his audience with him, no matter how demanding the programme.

His local premiere of Stravinsky's Rite of Spring drew a rock-concert response from a large crowd; I sat stunned as the orchestra cut through the work's rhythmically fiendish "Danse Sacrale" so accurately. His most esoteric performance, last year's The Timeless Land, was 150 minutes of unadulterated New Zealand modernism – a first for the country in intermedia works. It pulled in 1500 people.

As he told the audience, "You make the orchestra try adventurous pieces, as you really trust my tastes and selection."

Taddei's innovation was boundless. His Lully and Rameau ballet suites showed Louis XIV's lesser-known France as a world apart from the popular Italian and German baroque. Three of his innovative joys were pop concerts (Bic Runga, Anika Moa and Julia Deans in 2003); building a strong recording orchestra that eventually made 10 commercial CDs in six years; and his Proms concert slant. In his view, "any composer is Promsworthy ... provided the chunk is short".

Then what does an audience want and need? “Half the time we must give them what they want. Beethoven and Brahms are important to us all. The other half is to expand repertoire like any good art gallery or library. We must always keep ahead of audience taste through vital innovation that earns their trust. If not, pack your bags. Audience and orchestra will suffer slow death by artistic stagnation.”

Translating this vision into practice has been Taddei’s most profound contribution to Christchurch’s musical life.

Typically, his farewell concert at the Town Hall of Strauss’s Four Last Songs and Mahler’s Ninth was new, too. What perfect pairing. They’re the twilight of Germanic romanticism – Strauss writing his swansong in his eighties and Mahler closing the romantic symphony tradition while facing imminent death.

Soprano Patricia Wright gauged Strauss’s autumnal serenity well. Her well-judged soft tone in *Abendrot* was sometimes drowned, partly through her light low notes and partly by the orchestra. Warm orchestral codas were tender. Bernard Shapiro’s horn solo in the second one melted my heart.

Mahler Nine is a work conductors gradually grow into. Even great Mahlerians like Bernard Haitink probably didn’t get anywhere near the core of its many-sided visionary intensity at first shot. Taddei’s misjudgment was letting it sprawl out from its usual 73-76 minutes to a symphonic boa constrictor of 88 minutes. Well, he’s only been a fulltime professional conductor for six years. Give him a chance. Next time he confronts the brute he’ll obviously tighten up the outer movements. That’s where this performance meandered and nearly lost its way.

The first movement sprawled from the normal 26 minutes to 31. Here Taddei and the players were stilted, as though apprehensive of getting it right; the fragmentary opening and close were cautiously tapered. Elsewhere it needed a touch of instinctual Barbirollian spontaneity to breathe life into it. The finale went on endlessly.

Yet I’m sure Taddei wept tears in every bar: this was the most emotive conducting I have heard from him. His hushed coda dissolved into infinity. For his years and experience he got further than I expected.

The Christchurch Symphony, augmented to an un-precedented 80 for the Mahler, defied pessimists’ forecast of “miles too tough”. I was bowled over by their concentration and stamina in getting everything clean in this immensely difficult

work for a regional orchestra. Shapiro and his section handled Mahler's ever-present virtuosic horn scoring so well. The CS has gone up a notch from a tutti ensemble to an orchestra of refined soloists able to master Mahler's unique chamber scoring. Take a bow, Taddei and players. You gave us a night to treasure.

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