Sue Collins, Khachaturian Violin Concerto with improvised cadenza

It was an inspiring afternoon of entertainment as a particularly enthusiastic audience broke into rapturous applause throughout the NSW Doctors Orchestra Fundraising concert yesterday.

The Orchestra’s annual fundraising concert for the NSW Doctors Orchestra Sydney Eisteddfod Instrumental Scholarship had a great turnout yesterday when 80 medical professionals and students filled the Concord Concert Hall stage to present From Russia With Love.

Founder and director Dr Cathy Fraser said they felt privileged to have a soloist of the calibre and talent of Sydney Eisteddfod alumni Susan Collins, who played the Khachaturian Violin Concerto “absolutely brilliantly while the whole orchestra rose to the occasion”.

“We were especially moved by an encore of an Armenian folk song played by Susan and our conductor Dr David Benney as he paid tribute to Dr Brian Shearmur (who passed away in January) by playing his violin,” Dr Fraser said.

“Susan Collins is undertaking research into cadenzas and was commissioned to create a new cadenza. Today she will be playing the 1st cadenza from the Khachaturian Violin Concerto. Here she is interviewed about it by Prof Johannes Nottig of UWA.

You have four new cadenzas for the Khachaturian concert. I was one of them and I made a small request about the 1st cadenza.

SC: Yes, there are two great and well-known cadenzas, the 1st was composed by Khachaturian himself, but was never performed in the cadenza composed by David Osinric, for whom the concert was written.

OS: This is not a cadenza to refer to your own cadenza.

SC: I tend to prefer more complex cadenzas over those that are well-known, because it allows for a different type of communication with the audience. It allows the performer to step out of the composition for a moment and speak to the audience – almost as a ‘narrator’ does, to elucidate part of the musical story.

SC: While Osinric’s cadenza is more lyrical, that of the cadenza by Khachaturian, both of the standard cadenzas magnify the lush dissonances and focus on the arresting rhythmical features of the concerto. I wanted to draw more upon the lush Armenian folk and 5th form translations of the tonal material which I am particularly lyrical and memorable, and which contrast the rhythmic fluidity of the first movement.

The tonality of D is often chosen for violin
corsetas. Although Khachaturian used D major for his violin concerto rather than the more popular D minor, I wanted to give reference to some of the most celebrated virtuoso concertos that are also in the tonality of D, notably those by Beethoven, Schumann, Brahms and Shostakovich. These works played a vital role in establishing the violin concerto as a major symphonic work, which necessarily impacted upon the structure of Khachaturian’s composition for the genre.

SC: I can’t say that a cadenza is more effective for me if it is something new to the concert, while reflecting upon the composition. That could include improvisation, or perhaps simply the illusion that one is improvising. This is not to suggest that one should not know what is coming next. My Jazz improvisation teacher in Bloomington, Dr David Baker, once said to the class: “You don’t negatively think before the greatest jazz players would turn up to a gig without any idea what they were going to play?”

JF: Do you think you will improvise in the concert on your own cadenza?

SC: All being well the note (idea) will have been prepared beforehand. I am also aware that I am preparing for a cadenza that is going to come from having a pretty good idea of what the options are, what direction something can go in, and making choices based on what worked for me in the past. It is also helpful for a conductor to know when to bring the orchestra back in...

Interview with Susan Collins

Susan Collins, Khachaturian Violin Concerto with improvised cadenza.