

The West Australian

ENTERTAINMENT > ARTS REVIEWS



CLASSICAL LIVE +

Having it all in the Romantic era

Mirabilis Collective's Clara Schumann soiree at Callaway Auditorium relates an extraordinary life through her music and words.

David Cusworth Photo Credit: Tallulah Chong

Mirabilis Collective presents Clara Schumann soiree at Callaway Auditorium with Annie Aitken, Lucinda Nicholls

A packed house on the cusp of spring hailed Mirabilis Collective's Clara Schumann soiree at Callaway Auditorium on Sunday; an extraordinary life told through music and dramatic narrative.

Opera Australia artist Annie Aitken portrayed the composer, pianist, mother and wife to Robert Schumann, stepping up the drama with engaging charm among the accoutrements of the era: grand pianos, embroidered furnishings, shaded lamps and a floral screen.

Larghetto, from Quatre Pieces fugitives, broached the bill in melodious oboe (Stephanie Nicholls) and sonorous strings led by cellist Elena Wittkuhn with rising talents Ellie Malonzo (violin) and Jessica Casey (viola) sharing the stage in collegial style.

The Nicholls sisters, soprano Lucinda and violinist Julia, chimed in for the first of Sechs Lieder (Six Songs), Ich stand in dunkeln Traumen (I stood in dark dreams), the instrumental quintet setting a harmonious palette then falling away for soprano in rich Romantic tones, answered by oboe; each crisp and expressive.

Artistic director Stephanie Nicholls arranged the Quatre Pieces, Sechs Lieder, Piano Trio in G minor and the finale. She also teamed with daughter Julia to write the narration, creating space to nurture younger female artists in line with Mirabilis' multigenerational mission.



Bridget Hutchinson, Stephanie Nicholls and Elena Wittkuhn play the music of Clara Schumann for Mirabilis Collective on Sunday.

Pianist Bridget Hutchinson was the next to shine, in *Romanze* from Piano Concerto in A minor.

Aitken introduced the work with a diary entry written for the young Clara by an exploitative father, who had her touring at 12 and writing the concerto at 14; all while she struggled to find her own voice: “Words seemed out of my reach, but music made sense”.

Languid piano led in the *Romanze*, accompanied only by cello in Schumann’s original setting. Plangent keyboard playing set a gently grandiloquent mood for cello to drift in gracefully, resonant and bright; both finally fading to a blissful torpor.

The program labelled that episode “Finding Her Voice”. The next, “Choosing Her Own Path” started with *Un poco agitato*, from *Quatre Pieces fugitives*.

A furtive, scurrying melody raced around the string quartet, coalescing in urgent chords then running off again as if to celebrate Clara and Robert’s recondite romance, related by Aitken in Clara’s words.



Opera Australia artist Annie Aitken narrates Clara Schumann in character for Mirabilis Collective on Sunday.

Striving, driven strings introduced *Sie liebten sich beide* (They loved each other), etching out a tortured scene for Lucinda Nicholls to declaim on frustrated passion, closing in an agony of romantic distemper.

Liebeszauber (Love's magic) matched its label with intriguing vocal expression, the quartet falling to quietly insistent bowing as if anticipating each dramatic twist and turn.

Under the heading “The Art of Having It All”, the Scherzo and Andante from the Piano Trio in G minor underpinned the story of a travelling artist and working mother: “Here’s to the beautiful chaos of loving someone whose dreams are as big as your own,” Aitken proclaimed.

Florid oboe over agile piano and reflective cello had a spring in the step as lavish as Schumann’s aspirations, and as fresh as the Geraldton wax flowers the artists wore in their hair.

Stepping up for the Andante, the trio found full voice, attacking in focus and tone; then resiling to fulfilment in the close.

“Through Darkness and Light” combined Stephanie Nicholls with Ellie Malonzo for the Andante and Allegretto from Three Romances for Violin and Piano.

Here Aitken tapped the tragic vein of Robert’s failing mental health, Clara’s stoical raising of six children aged two to 15, with another on the way, while reconciling herself to Johannes Brahms’ attentions as a “second father” to the brood.

Poignantly emotive phrases dripped from the bow over delicately supportive piano, echoing Clara Schumann’s words and perhaps her dilemma; Malonzo herself a prodigy performer and composer in her teens.



Lucinda Nicholls sings the Lieder of Clara Schumann for Mirabilis Collective on Sunday.

A more playful ambience lifted the mood in the Allegretto, with whimsical trills ornamenting a deliciously light touch to land with aplomb in pizzicato.

“Redefining Love” revealed a letter to Brahms shedding light on their shared mystery, as soprano soared over string quartet for Der Mond kommt still gegangen (The Moon rises silently) as if to seal the missive; an eyes-wide-shut moment from a soul long gone yet present in music.

Fuller tone from strings and pensive presence from soprano combined for Ich habe in deinem Auge (I saw in your eyes); closing out in a restive, soulful place.

Finally, “A Life Transformed into Music” presented Clara Schumann at 76, four decades a widow and still fighting her corner; a feminist hero long before women’s suffrage or liberation.

Aitken’s last moving oration drew heartfelt applause, buoying Lucinda Nicholls to full-throated delivery over luscious strings for the last of the Six Songs, Die stille Lotosblume (The silent Lotus flower). Echoes of the vocal line in violin built to a telling climax then sudden, uncertain cadence.

Completion came with Liebst du um Schönheit (If you love for beauty), a defiant embrace of devotion for its own sake, with a sonorous sorority of voice and harmony to close.

Mirabilis Collective returns to Callaway Auditorium on November 16 for Southern Stars - Celebrating the music of Australian women.