



The West Australian

Arts Arts Reviews Music Music Reviews

Mirabilis Collective brings female talent and composition to UWA's Callaway Auditorium for Glow



David Cusworth The West Australian
Tue, 27 August 2024 6:10AM +

Mirabilis Collective graced the intimacy of UWA's Callaway Auditorium on Sunday with *Glow*, the latest in the all-female chamber music ensemble's *Illuminate* series.

Celebrating the "brilliance, resilience and creativity of women in music", as narrator Grace Chow said, the program reached back four centuries to pioneer Italian composer Barbara Strozzi.

Four extracts from *Hor Che Apollo* (Now that Apollo), arranged by Mirabilis co-founder Stephanie Nicholls, opened in spacious chords and bright Baroque melody. Nicholls' oboe was reinforced by cello (Elena Wittkuhn), then joined by flute (co-founder Tresna Stampalia), guitar (Abbey Felton) and violin (Julia Nicholls) in a florid palette that made the most of sparse scoring.

Percussive guitar and tambourine (Julia Nicholls) drove a rhythmic *Ritornello* link, segueing neatly to soprano Lucinda Nicholls, delicately intoning over stately accompaniment for *Mentre altrove il pie' s'invia* (As I go elsewhere).

Withholding voice until the final stanza heightened its effect, with deft grace notes elaborating an ethereal ambience.

Dolce Cantavi (Sweetly Singing), by Caroline Shaw, continued the all-female composition with antique text in a modern setting. Alto Rachel Singer joined soprano sisters Lucinda and Julia Nicholls in a-cappella harmony with subtle discord and impeccable diction; a well-matched trio. A pastoral theme, programmatic yet natural, rolled out in clear contrapuntal lines, expressive throughout.

I Hold You, from *Tribe*, by Sally Whitwell, matched the trio with gentle jazz piano (Stephanie Nicholls) and flute in relaxed ambience. Rachel Singer led in first Lucinda then Julia Nicholls, poppy in tone over mellow cello, flute and piano, breaking to unison voices then individual lines weaving a rich texture.

Wisely and Slow, by The Staves, offered a country-folk timbre in a-cappella trio, their close harmony a welcoming soundscape for piano, cello and flute to chime in; changing up to a humming chorus with syncopated backing augmented on tambourine by Julia Nicholls, who shared arranging duties with her mother, Stephanie.



Rachel Singer, Lucinda Nicholls and Julia Nicholls.

Elena Wittkuhn, Tresna Stampalia and Lucinda Nicholls.

Three movements from *Fire Dances*, commemorating the 2019-20 “Black Summer”, drew from Victorian Nat Bartsch (*Haze for Days*), WA’s Olivia Davies (*Haze*) and NT’s Cathy Applegate (*Cycads After Fire*).

Languid piano arpeggios opened the first stanza, drawing in violin and cello with harmonics descending to mid-range then returning to the heights. For the second, urgently rumbling piano again drew in strings but maintained momentum as lead, with violin and cellos restrained through to an irresolute cadence. Finally, flute joined in breezy melody for a more luxuriant air reflecting growth in destruction’s wake; again unresolved in the cadence, as if heralding another episode.

Nadia Boulanger’s *Cantique (Lux Aeterna)*, dedicated to the late Emeritus Professor David Tunley, celebrated Boulanger’s conducting, composing, and teaching of luminaries including Aaron Copland, Philip Glass and Tunley.

Tolling piano and constant violin supported a soaring soprano solo (Lucinda Nicholls) with cello and flute lending depth, Nicholls summoning a cathedral-like resonance to close on a prayerful note.

Student Yaashinii Vasudavan extended the multi-generational mix, taking on piano as Stephanie Nicholls move to oboe for Deborah Cheetham Fraillon’s *Bundjil Ngalingu*; “voices of the land brought into the present”, as Chow said.

Pensive cello and peeling piano led in Lucinda Nicholls singing in Indigenous language, echoed by cello and oboe, then morphing to English.

Nicholls, now in lusty and lucid ballad mode over energetic cello with piano and oboe highlights, had the advantage of surprise with her many changes in delivery; an enticing offering that kept the audience guessing.



Mirabilis Collective's Lucinda, Julia and Stephanie Nicholls, Yaashinii Vasudavan, Elena Wittkuhn and Tresna Stampalia at Callaway Auditorium for Glow.

The world premiere of West Australian Candice Susnjar's *It Was Only a Dream* painted a magical backdrop in piano, oboe, cello, flute and violin for a plangent soprano entry, matched by piano as woodwind and strings fluttered in ephemeral accompaniment.

Picking up dynamics and tempo, the mood changed to realisation and regret, the instrumentalists keening a lament to embrace the lonely solo voice, setting up a buzz for the composer's well-deserved ovation.

Gabriela, by Carmen Marulanda, dedicated to the composer's grandmother and in homage to Colombian tradition, paired a slow-burn flute with guitar in a sigh of nostalgia. Pace and rhythm flipped to a dance measure full of wide vistas and unassuming energy, returning briefly to nostalgia before stepping up again in celebration for another heartfelt cheer.

Let It Out, by indie group Seeker Lover Keeper, re-engaged vocal harmony, led in by pulsating cello and guitar, for an easy-going pop number. The singers leaned into the music as cello and cor anglais (Stephanie Nicholls) added tone and depth, closing in generous harmony.

Finally, Jackie de Shannon's *When You Walk in the Room* rocked the hall in a resounding, whole-hearted send off.



Composer Candice Susnjar takes a bow.