

The West Australian

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WORLD PREMIERE +

Constellation of composition tells her story

Southern Stars shine in Mirabilis Collective's celebration of music by Australian women at Callaway Auditorium.

David Cusworth

Mirabilis Collective's Southern Stars shine bright in festival of feminine creativity at Callaway Auditorium

Southern Stars shone through the heat of the afternoon in Mirabilis Collective's celebration of music by Australian women at Callaway Auditorium on Sunday.

Nine pieces curated by artistic director Stephanie Nicholls (oboe and piano), with arrangements by daughter Julia (violin and voice), many sung by soprano sister Lucinda, gave a bright account of contemporary composition.

Narration and interviews by ABC's Joanna Trilling highlighted each contribution, alongside their fellow Mirabilis founders Tresna Stamapalia (flute) and Elena Wittkuhn (cello), with guests Yi-Yun Loei (harp) and composer-violist Kathy Potter, in a festival of feminine creativity.

Three of Julia Nicholls' arrangements opened the bill as she introduced Yandool, a welcoming song by the Stiff Gins' Kaleena Briggs and Nardi Simpson. Clapsticks set the pace for jazzy piano, cello and the sister act of sopranos. Flute drifted in to extend the palette, warm and breezy with a full-toned conclusion.

Brenda Gifford's Galaa (Summer) extended the Indigenous ambience with another breezy flute, violin and cello combination over syncopated piano; a touch of the Caribbean in rhythm and bluesy ornamentation, balmy yet brief.

Kate Miller-Heidke's Where?, from The Rabbits, completed the trilogy, with Lucinda Nicholls bridging genres from classical to pop. "Sometimes you have got to hold the microphone far away, and sometimes you have to lean in close," she told Trilling.



Julia, Lucinda and Stephanie Nicholls, Elena Wittkuhn and Tresna Stampalia are the core of Mirabilis Collective.

Silvery piano led in flute then soprano in a folk-pop ballad channelling Kate Bush heights with full-souled expression. Julia Nicholls' arrangements have a spacious quality allowing all voices to be heard; especially her sister's in this family-oriented ensemble.

Sati, by Jessica Wells, featured harp arpeggios and a florid cascade of flute, echoed by harp then blossoming into harmony and melody interwoven in a dance between generations. Darker tolling in harp led in a dreamy sequence, meditative yet alert, renewing energy in both parts then resolving to the sparse pattern of the opening.

The world premiere of Potter's Love, from the poem by Caitlin Maling, channelled both women's experience of young motherhood.

Plangent harp led on strings and a swirling mystery of sound as soprano chimed in over a densely textured soundscape. Rhythmic counterpoint built energy towards a complex climax then fell away to contemplation with woodwind picking up the lead over shimmering harp; returning to mystery and fading to high harmonics.

October in the Chair, by Melody Eotvos, reprised the motherhood theme. Insistent bowing by strings ushered in sweeping woodwind with harp punctuation; more a northern October bordering on winter than southern spring into summer.

Frequent rhythmic breaks kept the audience guessing before resiling to a quasi-pastoral scene; spring after all, expressed in sweetly sonorous strings and birdcalls in woodwind over bustling harp. A sudden hiatus returned to the strident onset of the piece, carried through in the cadence.



Lucinda and Julia Nicholls, Kathy Potter, Elena Wittkuhn, Yi-Yun Loei, Tresna Stampalia and Stephanie Nicholls present Southern Stars for Mirabilis Collective at Callaway Auditorium.

The Offering, by Elena Kats-Chernin, reimagined a piano quintet with flute as first violin. The Andante movement matched its label in lilting, lyrical style; deepening timbre through cello and viola with flute softening the edge.

More demanding instrumentation than before brought fuller expression, individually and collectively, with cello a standout, answered by viola in the cadence.

The Vivace scherzo movement to follow again met its description in an offbeat, tango-like romp. Driving piano kept all on their toes, with vim and vigour in the chase and a whimsical sign off.

Two more Julia Nicholls arrangements closed the bill.

Making it Through, by Angie McMahon, featured undulating piano and repeated pizzicato supporting a steady vocal narrative breaking to an urgent lament; amplified in the ensemble then returning to a steady pulse as belt morphed to ballad and back again.

Lucinda Nicholls seemed to crave a kaleidoscope of genres and her sister's setting obliged, fading to a single piano line to close.

Finally, O Vertigo! (Miller-Heidke) again opened in piano and pizzicato, leading on soprano; a busy, poppy tone augmented by piccolo.

Duelling soprano sisters added another layer, ABBA-like in their convivial chorus, giving way to skat echoed in violin and piccolo in crazy country style to close.