

LIMELIGHT

Music, Arts & Culture

Review

Biographica (Sydney Chamber Opera, Sydney Festival)

Butel captivates as flawed Renaissance physician in Finsterer's new opera.

Bay 20, Carriageworks, Sydney

Sydney Chamber Opera's *Biographica* opens on Renaissance physician and mathematician Gerolamo Cardano plotting the day of his death on an astrological chart, a death knell of gongs and drums accompanying his calculations. A colourful genius in a time when science and mysticism were intrinsically interwoven, Cardano wrote treatises on medicine, mathematics, games of chance – including how to cheat at them – and dreams. It is his life and writings that inspired Australian composer Mary Finsterer's first opera, with a libretto by Tom Wright, receiving its world premiere at Carriageworks as part of this year's Sydney Festival.

Finsterer tells the story of Cardano's life through a series of vignettes, as the composer explained to [Limelight](#), "it's like a visit to a great portrait gallery, full of different paintings – but all depicting the same person."



Jane Sheldon as Cardano's mother. All photos © Lisa Tomasetti

Actor Mitchell Butel is captivating as Cardano, and it is his striking intensity that holds the show together. Butel himself doesn't sing, but is supported by an ensemble of five who serve as both chorus and cast of characters. As narrator, Butel's eyes burn into the audience while Cardano's mother (Jane Sheldon) sings a shopping list of ingredients for the 16th-century DIY abortion that fails to prevent his birth. Sheldon's soprano is crystalline, keening in the high register, her lower register guttural with grief.



Jessica Donoghue and Mitchell Butel

Butel conveys Cardano's passion for mathematics and medicine with an animated vigour, and his coldness to his children with a brutal lack of concern. As his syphilitic daughter Chiara lies dying – Jessica O'Donoghue's voice rich and lamenting over Rowan Phemister's harp – Cardano relates the symptoms of her disease to the audience as if delivering a medical lecture. He is arrogant and uncaring as his son Aldo – Andrew Goodwin with his polished-bronze tenor – is imprisoned for theft.



Simon Lobelson and Anna Fraser

The emotional climax of the opera comes as Cardano's favourite son, sung with bleak disdain by Simon Lobelson, poisons his unfaithful wife, Caterina – a crime for which he will be hanged. Mezzo-soprano Anna Fraser is an arch, knowing Caterina, her full, characterful mezzo a stark contrast to Lobelson's cold, smooth baritone. Despite the high quality of the singing, however, this scene feels overly long and somehow fails to deliver the emotional punch toward which the opera has been building.

Butel's animated performance reaches a feverish crescendo in the penultimate scene, as Cardano is once again excluded from the College of Physicians in Milan, his theories on medicine becoming lost in his theories on the universe.

Though Finsterer's score, expertly delivered by Ensemble Offspring, conducted by SCO's Artistic Director Jack Symonds, is derived from Renaissance music, it is more than merely pastiche. Contemporary inflections and sounds creep in subtly at first – shimmering harmonics adorning more conventional Renaissance melodies –

but with increasing intensity. Serial elements – reflecting Cardano's own mathematical experiments – lend the music a more complex, menacing patina as the work progresses. The music is almost relentlessly ominous, accompanying Butel's dialogue with a pulsing, film-music intensity or ramping up the anxious mood with glittering, ethereal chimes.



The Archbishop and doctors

There are few moments of lightness in this opera, though the fourth scene – in which Cardano treats the illness of Archbishop John Hamilton in Edinburgh – exploits the ironies of archaic medical treatments such as leeching, bleeding, starving the patient and lighting a fire under the bed, with Cardano’s calls for sterility laughed off as quackery.

The chorus/quintet piece *Lock of Combinations* is the highlight of the opera, the five chorus members describing the mechanics of Cardano’s invention in Latin as three dimensional plans and diagrams spiral against the back of the stage, part of James Brown’s slick, sensitively rendered AV design.

Director Janice Muller takes full advantage of the deep performance space of Bay 20 and even with the EO musicians taking up a significant part of the stage it never feels claustrophobic. Scene changes are quick and organic while Matt Cox’s lighting design is clean and effective. Charles Davis’ set and costume design is sparing but functional, the dark costumes contributing to the sombre aesthetic.

Biographica is a dark, vividly realised portrayal of a fascinatingly intelligent yet flawed character. The 12 scenes that make up the opera combine to paint a remarkably effective portrait of Cardano, thanks in no small part to Butel’s enthralling performance. Though the segmented structure dampens the dramatic momentum of the story at times – and a focus on Cardano’s ideas means Wright’s libretto tends to favour dialogue over drama – Finsterer’s score thrums with energy throughout, making this a worthy addition to the Australian operatic canon.

Sydney Chamber Opera and Ensemble Offspring present *Biographica* at Carriageworks, Sydney as part of the [Sydney Festival](#) until January 13

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