

Biographica

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How many good plays have ever been written about scientists, or a new opera about a 16th-century mathematician who employs a teenage son as a venture for [Sydney Festival](#). How many people would go to Carriageworks hoping to hear binomial coefficients sung?

Fortunately Gerolamo Cardano (1501-76) was no pencil-pushing nerd: he didn't just contribute to probability theory, he gambled and fought with criminals, and was also an innovative physician. There was plenty of drama in the life of this Italian early-Renaissance man, and it's presented beautifully here.

Mary Finsterer's *Biographica* is structured not as a strictly chronological plot but rather a sequence of 12 scenes, some dealing with specific events such as births, illnesses and deaths, others more like reflections on Cardano's big concerns: humanity and the cosmos.

Astonishingly engaging is Scene VIII, a description of a combination lock invented by Cardano, in terms precise enough for a patent application, sung with clockwork accuracy and dynamo power, together with finely illustrated animated projections by James Brown. This now commonplace device becomes an object lesson on abstract numbers determining physical reality, and resonates in our period of smartphones and Wikileaks. The polymath Cardano also pioneered many basic theoretical concepts that became indispensable in modern engineering, including negative and imaginary numbers.

Tom Wright's gutsy yet finely crafted English and Latin libretto booms through five excellent soloists: Jane Sheldon, Simon Lobelson, Andrew Goodwin, Anna Fraser and Jessica O'Donoghue. Every one of these is worth lining up early for – so you can get a seat close to the stage; you may be amazed by the strength and quality of these voices.

The main role of Cardano is spoken not sung, but Mitchell Butel acts it so well that we feel we are joining him in a critical review of a life that was extraordinary while far from perfect; sharing his struggle to make sense of a harsh and complex world that is changing in ways that are creative and destructive. Cardano's worldview now seems half-recognisable, half-weird: one foot is in the 16th century, with its earnest astrology, primitive bloodletting and superstitious humours, but the other is advancing towards now-routine principles in science and medicine.

By analogy, the composer Finsterer draws deep from the medieval minstrel origins of Renaissance music, but links up with intervening periods and contemporary art music styles, delivering highly appealing yet substantive fabrics for every scene. It succeeds paradoxically by being both palatable and unsettling, like the tale it carries.

Conductor Jack Symonds executed Finsterer's score precisely with his proven Sydney Chamber Opera players; eminent guests from Ensemble Offspring, including Claire Edwards and Zubin Kanga, raised the number of instrumentalists to not even a dozen, yet the vast space of Bay 20 was filled with profoundly impressive sounds.

A triumphant level of achievement is what Sydney has come to routinely expect from the SCO; this premiere of a much-anticipated work by a professor from Monash University shows they are now a significant national cultural asset.

Director Janice Muller and designer Charles Davis bestowed the 12 tableaux with a Rembrandt look at Target prices, delivering a highly memorable, even haunting experience.

This is an exemplary achievement for the Sydney Festival: new, fresh high art that will be enjoyed by a wider audience than any accountant would have predicted.

BY: JASON CATLETT

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Details

Event website:

<http://sydneychamberopera.com/?p=2163>

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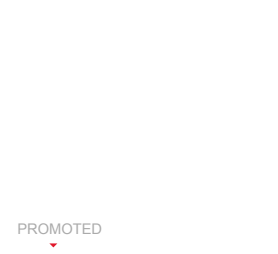
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