

# Biographica: opera tackles Cardano's emotional flaws

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By **MURRAY BLACK**

11:00PM JANUARY 8, 2017 •  NO COMMENTS

The life and work of the Italian Renaissance polymath Gerolamo Cardano (1501-76) was rich in incident and achievement. Brilliant accomplishments in the fields of mathematics, science and medicine brought him fame and fortune across Europe.

Yet his later years were overshadowed by tragedy. His older son was beheaded for poisoning his adulterous wife, his younger son was a compulsive thief and his daughter died of syphilis contracted through prostitution. It's a story ripe for operatic treatment.

Composer Mary Finsterer and librettist Tom Wright's new opera *Biographica* is an episodic, 12-scene snapshot of Cardano's professional and personal life. Its dramatic power largely derives from an intriguing double duality. Although an intellectual genius, Cardano is portrayed as being emotionally deficient.

In several scenes, he eloquently lectures the audience on his then cutting-edge views on maths, science, astronomy and humanity's place in the cosmos. Elsewhere, he is an emotionally mute, detached observer.

In one scene, he coolly explains the symptoms of syphilis while his daughter, Chiara, writhes in agony on a straw bed. In another, his now-dead three children berate him for his lack of love. His response is to walk away. So articulate and erudite in his intellectual pursuits, Cardano is virtually devoid of emotional intelligence.

This conflict is cleverly represented by *Biographica's* second duality. Cardano is portrayed by a non-singing actor while a quintet of singers represents his tragic family members.

It was a brilliantly realised conceit. As Cardano, Mitchell Butel was a compelling and commanding presence. Inflecting every phrase with meaning and purpose, he captured his character's astounding intellect and his difficult and volatile personality.

By contrast, the vocal quintet successfully balanced beauty of sound with the need for expressive intensity, thereby conveying their characters' emotional pain and despair.

Finsterer's music proved to be as eclectic and wide-ranging as Cardano's intellectual pursuits. Scored for a chamber ensemble of strings, woodwinds, keyboards and percussion, *Biographica's* complex yet crystalline textures, evocative instrumental colours, intricate rhythms and Renaissance-inspired vocal writing resulted in an absorbing, appealing soundworld.

Director Janice Muller made a virtue of simplicity. Using only a few props, Charles Davis's period costumes and Matt Cox's atmospheric, predominantly spotlit lighting designs, she ensured each scene made its impact before swiftly moving on. This kept the focus on the action while simultaneously capturing its intensifying power.

Inventive, engaging, stimulating and moving, *Biographica* is an outstanding new opera.

It deserves regular performances as well as a permanent place in the repertory.

*Biographica. By Mary Finsterer. Sydney Chamber Opera. Ensemble Offspring. Sydney Festival. Director: Janice Muller. Conductor: Jack Symonds. Carriageworks, January 7. Tickets: \$41-\$46. Bookings: 1300 723 038 or online. Duration: 90 mins, no interval. Until Friday.*