

News From Under the Southern Cross (Edition 76):

Long Autumn Nights and the Sound of Strings

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Canberra has been on winter time since the beginning of April and the sun sets much earlier. What soothes the soul on these long autumn nights is classical music. In this edition, I recount the recent Australian Chamber Orchestra (ACO) concert I attended in Canberra.



ACO Concert at Llewellyn Hall, The Australian National University on May 14

Photo: ACO Nic Walker

1. A cultural desert?

Throughout my many years as a diplomat, I have nurtured my love of music in my own way. Since my days as an international student in New York, classical music at Lincoln Hall and jazz at Greenwich Village have been an integral part of my life.

During my London days I could often be spotted among the audience of Royal Albert Hall or Cadogan Hall. I am a seasoned regular at Japan's Karuizawa Ohga Hall. In fact, I can go on and on with the list of my favourite concert halls around the world that I frequented as a devout fan. However, in some cities I have worked in, the locals themselves call their cities 'cultural deserts' as they are deprived of a quality music scene. As I am a humble diplomat I will refrain from naming names!

Having attended an ACO concert at The Australian National University's Llewellyn Hall, I am reminded that Australia is also blessed in this respect.

2. A chance encounter

I met ACO Artistic Director and Lead Violin, Mr Richard Tognetti and Principal Violin, Ms Satu Vänskä at a party in Sydney.

It was a masquerade party organised by a mutual friend, Alf Moufarrige, a businessperson who has a large presence even in Japan. As a condition of attendance, I was told, "you must come wearing a mask". And so I had no choice but to wear a *Hannya* mask (a mask depicting a demonic character from Noh theatre) and my wife a fox mask, much to the amusement of Alf who greeted us. As it turns out, there were many guests who did not wear masks. It was a grand party with many



Mr Richard Tognetti

Photo: ACO Ben Sullivan



Ms Satu Vänskä

Photo: ACO Ben Sullivan

big names in attendance whose identities would have been obvious whether they were wearing a mask or not, including former Prime Ministers John Howard and Tony Abbott.

Richard and Satu brought a lot of excitement to the party with their violin performance. I discovered that Richard is a regular visitor to the popular ski resort Niseko in Hokkaido, Japan and Satu, originally from Finland, had lived in Japan with her missionary father. We were therefore so glad when we received an invitation from these two fine artists to their concert in Canberra! We proceeded to the concert hall with hearts filled with excitement.

3. A huge success!

According to ACO Chief Operating Officer, Ms Alexandra Cameron-Fraser, who guided us on arrival, the Sydney-based ACO is made up of 17 members and performs concerts not only in Sydney but throughout Australia. The orchestra has also performed in Japan many times and is scheduled to tour Berlin this year. This time they performed music by Mozart and Britten. Following their Canberra performance, they will tour Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth.

I thoroughly enjoyed my first classical music concert in a long time. I am used to listening to classical music on record players and JBL speakers, and am therefore reasonably picky about sound quality, but nothing beats a live orchestra. The gentle yet deep sound of elegant Mozart on the strings filled the silence of the autumn evening and my heart with light.



Llewellyn Hall – Designed to provide a good view of the stage from every seat

Photo: Peter Hislop

What's interesting is the design of Llewellyn Hall. There are no aisles running through the middle of the hall, except on both sides. This is a common feature of Australian concert halls, as is the case with the Sydney Opera House. Each row of seats runs for more than 50 unobstructed by an aisle. You have to make other audience members stand up from their seats in order to reach your own, which is difficult, but from the point of view of the performers on stage, an auditorium with each seat filled would no doubt be a spectacular sight.

4. Ms GOTO Aiko

One of the ACO's long-standing violinists is Japan-born Ms GOTO Aiko. She has many fans among Japanese living in Australia. I had the opportunity to see Ms GOTO perform at this concert before my very eyes.

Ms GOTO accentuates her stage presence in the way she sways when she performs despite her petite stature. She exudes energy and the sound of the strings is wonderful. I was also mesmerised by the richness of her facial expressions during the performance, especially her gentle smile.



Ms GOTO Aiko (centre) performing.

She captivated the audience with her outstanding stage presence.

Photo: ACO Nic Walker

After the performance, I went to introduce myself to her. It turns out she is a graduate of the Toho Gakuen College Music Department, and completed graduate studies at The Juilliard School in New York. I was quite pleased and reassured to discover the similarities we shared as I too attended Toho Gakuen and studied in New York.



Ms GOTO Aiko and members of the ACO performing at a charity concert at the Japanese Ambassador's official residence in Canberra in 2018.

(Photo: Embassy of Japan)

In August we are scheduled to have the honour of having Ms GOTO visit my official residence in Canberra to kindly give a performance. Now that I have seen her energetic performance in person, I am looking forward to it even more.

YAMAGAMI Shingo