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Bells make for glowing finale

In mid July, Hobart's annual Festival of Voices was brought to a glowing and sonorous conclusion with a performance by IHOS of Constantine Koukias' *Prayer Bells* in St David's Cathedral.

Even the chill of a mid-winter evening in these lower latitudes could not deter an audience which filled the cathedral to capacity to hear this work which has so far been heard in Adelaide, Canberra and Melbourne.

On this occasion, the musical component was augmented by around 70 ghostly non-singing performers who, remarkably, managed to glide ethereally about the cathedral in timeworn wedding gowns while bearing candles, performing shadow-plays, and assembling a veritable armada of candlelit paper lanterns (some of considerable dimensions) without once breaking the spell woven by Koukias' music.

As the title of the piece suggests, the sound world which filled the cathedral was largely evoked by the sound of 80 specially cast hand bells, deftly manipulated by eight male choristers, who provided a rich drone over which the bells were rung, struck, bowed, and on one occasion, struck and dipped briefly into bowls of water, momentarily altering their pitch. The effect was intriguing and compelling, especially when multiplied eightfold – the sounds ascending like spirits into the darkness of St David's high vaulted ceilings.

The bells allowed for brilliant pointillistic possibilities while conveying a sense of timelessness. In a program note, Koukias states that the bells also provided a beautifully simple way of connecting the three ancient but divergent chant forms in the piece.

Hebrew, Byzantine and Latin cantors all in turn gave voice to ancient texts on themes of spiritual ascent and descent. The Hebrew Cantor, Peretta Anggerek, was in excellent voice, and sang with great elegance and power. Christopher Richardson, the Latin Cantor, was also very effective, giving an extremely focussed and spirited reading of his text.

The true vocal magician was the Byzantine Cantor,

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Petros Kyriakou. His singing, while lacking the youthful vigor of the other two, nevertheless seemed to most authentically resonate with echoes of an ancient world. Physically resembling a kind of Greek Harry Dean Stanton, his mellifluous voice and easy command of the Byzantine idiom were perfectly suited to the surrounding texture of bells, intoning choir and occasional rhythmic striking of stone against stone.

Masterfully coordinating the musical forces was Jean-Louis Forestier, no stranger to Koukias' work, having previously conducted the world premiere of *Tesla – Lightning in His Hand* in 2003. With a solid background in percussion and having musically directed many contemporary works throughout Europe and Japan, he was a sure-footed guide. Given that the 11 musicians were dispersed between three separate stages at substantial distances from one another in the cathedral, and that sung phrases and percussion were often considerably prolonged by the use of electronic delay, Forestier's crystal-clear direction was all the more remarkable.

Koukias' setting of the 21 prayers that made up *Prayer Bells* clearly aimed to work at a subterranean level of our collective consciousness.

Without being necessarily moved emotionally, the large audience was nevertheless entirely captivated and receptive to what was being played out before them, despite the fact that most would have been unable to understand the words being sung (it was too dark to read the program during the performance). When we all surfaced at the conclusion of the performance, the applause was loud and long-lasting.

Many of the audience then happily joined the procession of smiling (but still ghostly) lantern bearers that led from the cathedral to Salamanca Place, where, as somehow seemed fitting, the lanterns were consigned to an enormous bonfire amid community singing, bringing this year's Festival of Voices to a very warm and celebratory end.

— KIRK HUME