

## Listenup

## Choir for all seasons



IN an age when everything's instant – including, it seems, success and stardom – the term “diva”, like “icon”, has really lost its meaning.

English-born Sally Maer decided to call herself Cello Diva when she was busking as an 18-year-old, and now that her debut album *Bed Of Roses* has been released by ABC Classics listeners are perhaps entitled to expect a little more than they get.

The 15 pieces – there are 16 tracks but one is a rather limp remix of track 8, Bryan Adams' *Heaven* – are a pretty uninspiring mixture of middle-of-the-road elevator standards and predictable classical fare like Saint-Saens' *The Swan*, Villa-Lobos's *Bachianas brasileiras* and a snatch of Vivaldi's *Seasons*.

It's all a bit one-paced and, though Ms Maer is a “marketable” and competent performer, the “diva” tag is drawing a pretty long bow.

Also if I hear another version of Sting's *Fields Of Gold* I'll scream! It's available at \$30.95 rrp from ABC shops and most music stores.

Steve Moffatt



IF any opera composer's music is custom-made to break down the barriers between “entertainment” and “culture” that man is terminal smoker and racing car-mad philanderer Giacomo Puccini.

His lush works pitch ill-fated lovers into such unlikely settings as Nagasaki, the Wild West, Peking and a freezing, leaking Parisian garret. They're also full of big numbers – sometimes several of them – and you'll find most of them on ABC Classic's *Puccini Romance* featuring Antoinette Halloran and Rosario La Spina.

Both the Victorian soprano and the Brisbane ex-brickie are well-known to Sydney audiences and they combine well in the duets – *Ah, those eyes!* from *Tosca* and *Night is coming* from *Madama Butterfly* – as well as giving their all in most of the favourite arias.

Only having seen La Spina on stage where, it has to be said, he's not the most fleet-footed of actors, I was extremely impressed by the beauty of his timbre. His emotional intensity has never been in doubt.

Both singers are given sterling backing by the Queensland Orchestra under Stephen Mould.

Available for \$30.95 rrp at ABC shops and music stores.

Steve Moffatt

**CONCERT:** The Bach Choir  
**WHERE:** Verbruggen Hall, Conservatorium  
**WHEN:** Wednesday, March 26  
**REVIEWER:** Steve Moffatt

**A**FTER 131 seasons and 884 concerts you'd expect The Bach Choir from London to be a class act. Add to that the names of Dames Janet Baker and Felicity Lott as vice-presidents, not forgetting Prince Charles as patron, and you know you're not going to be disappointed.

Under musical director David Hill the first half of this concert was firmly planted in the 20th century, opening with a riveting performance of Leonard Bernstein's *Chichester Psalms*, sung in the original Hebrew.

The five psalms that Bernstein chose cover a vast range of emotions, opening with the thundering excitement of “Awake, psaltery and harp!” from Psalm 108, with its great hammered chords from organist Janet Watts joined for this setting by local harpist Genevieve Lang and percussionist Daryl Pratt.

The joyful Psalm 100 subsides into a peaceful soprano solo for the famous 23rd, “The Lord is my shepherd”, admirably suited to young



The Bach Choir are a class act with a long history.

Sydney-born singer Lorina Gore's sweet and expressive timbre.

Tenors and basses were at full stretch going through agitated changes of rhythm and dynamic in “Why do the nations rage” before the submissive unison chorus from Psalm 131 and the peaceful brotherly love of 133.

New Zealand-born baritone Michael Leighton Jones also had to run the gamut of emotions in the demanding *Five Mystical Songs* by Ralph Vaughan Williams, but it was in the second half that the full beauty and subtlety of the 114 voices under Hill's precise direction hit home.

Two Mozart favourites – the lilting, almost floating hymn *Ave verum corpus* and the soaring *Laudate Dominum* with Gore's solo glittering like a gem – led to the highlight of this concert, Faure's *Requiem* with its charming mixture of plainchant and French late-Romantic influences.

Again Gore shone in the famous *Pie Jesu* and Leighton Jones lent outstanding support to the chorus in the *Libera me* section with its almost resigned *Dies irae* excerpts.

The Bach Choir, with their perfect intonation and attention to detail, were last in Australia in 1994 – let's hope we don't have to wait another 14 years to hear them again.

## Silence and music of the spheres

**CONCERT:** Shostakovich 8 with SSO conducted by Steven Sloane  
**WHERE:** Opera House  
**WHEN:** Friday, March 28  
**REVIEWER:** Steve Moffatt

**S**YDNEY composer George Lentz believes today's society has lost all patience and lacks the ability to contemplate time and silence.

For 20 years he has been working on a cycle of compositions inspired by Hubble telescope images of outer space and Pythagoras's theory of the music of the spheres, along with aspects of Aboriginal culture.

Called *Caeli enarrant* (*The heavens are telling*) each work is written for various combinations of instruments and takes up to 10 years to complete, so the premiere of one of these extraordinary pieces is an event in itself.

Lentz wanted to write music “that does not evolve or unfold, but simply ‘is’ ” and he combines a spirituality with a keen knowledge of the orchestral palette – he is a violinist with the Sydney Symphony – and the result is a soundscape which gives the listener the feeling of drifting through space.

His newest work is *Monh*, an Aboriginal name for a star, like all the titles in the

*Mysterium* section of the cycle. It was commissioned by Tabea Zimmermann, one of the world's top violists who, with her US conductor husband Steven Sloane, made her Australian debut in this concert to play the work which she'd premiered three years ago in Luxembourg.

Not so much a concerto as a journey with the viola acting as guide, *Monh*'s aural imagery is largely based on Aboriginal dot paintings of the night sky, and the 20-minute work is punctuated by little pinpoints of colour from the various sections of the orchestra. In one section after an enormous fortissimo two more violas, both tuned down, join the soloist in an eerie dance.

But overall the music conveys the vastness and mystery of the cosmos, a feeling in stark contrast to the second piece on the program.

Shostakovich composed his eighth – and perhaps greatest – symphony at the height of World War II, shortly after the battle of Stalingrad when the tide was turning against

the Germans. Secretly dedicated to the victims of Stalin's war, the work was criticised by the regime for being too pessimistic.

Sloane maintained the slow-building tension of the massive *adagio* opening movement, which starts in the strings before reinforcements comes from brass and woodwind, eventually developing into a ruthless march from which the sombre tones of Andre Oguey's cor anglais solo ending offer little consolation.

The allegretto with its perky piccolo was no less effective in acting as a bridge to the final three movements, played without pause.

All sections of the orchestra feature in this rarely-heard symphony – the SSO gave its first Australian performance in 1985 and this concert was the first time they'd played it since. Particular mention should be made of Rosamund Plummer, on piccolo, trumpeter Daniel Mendelow, Ben Jacks on horn and Craig Wernicke, who was kept unusually busy on bass clarinet.



George Lentz believes we have lost the ability to contemplate time and silence.