

WA Opera's Oratorio reimagines Bach with Lachlan Skipworth & Margrete Helgeby Chaney at UWA



[David Cusworth](#) The West Australian
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UWA Symphonic Chorus and Symphony Orchestra join WA Opera principals and directors at Winthrop Hall for Bach's Oratorio, with additional music by Lachlan Skipworth. Credit: West Beach Studio

A lingering hint of Easter ritual took on a carnival air when barefoot choristers jostled into Winthrop Hall for WA Opera's re-imagining of Bach's Oratorio on Saturday.

Smoke and lights added to the atmosphere of a story reworked immersively by director Margrete Helgeby Chaney with active chorus and soloists, using recitatives between arias re-set by composer Lachlan Skipworth.

When Bach was writing, religious oratorios were the poor cousin to operas, but popular with producers because the staging requirements were much less. This production pitched roughly halfway, with lighting by Mark Haslam sketching scenery and shaping ambience in the round for a fluid, emotive experience.



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Bach's opening Sinfonia rang out from the high gallery with characteristic verve, WA Opera artistic director Chris van Tuinen conducting a Baroque-scale UWA Symphony Orchestra while their UWA Symphonic Chorus colleagues milled around the central performance space and raised podium, exchanging elemental gestures and miming a social, perhaps cultish narrative.

Overarching spotlights picked out an elevated reflecting disk, evoking higher authority, before oboist Aiden Labuschagne brought the focus back to earth, playing out the Adagio amid the swirling crowd with a half-profile beam adding to mystery in music and stagecraft.

An eruption of voice and light in the aria "Kommt, eilet und lauffet" (Come swiftly and hasten) summoned the thrill of the resurrection with a hint of children's crusade in the chorus, before tenor Ry Charleston and bass Jake Bigwood returned to the text; echoed by male voices on the floor and females from the high galleries, earth and heaven united.

Soprano Bella Marlsen and alto Jillian Halleron took station across the hall as a silvery carillon of tuned percussion led in the first recitative, "O kalter Manner Sinn" (Oh, cold hearts of men).



Oboist Aiden Labuschagne plays Adagio in WA Opera's Oratorio. Credit: West Beach Studio

Both women, white-robed as if in homage to angels at the tomb, personified a numinous spirituality that reflected the cathedral-like quality of the venue as Marslen's lead rose with uncanny ease above the swell.

Piano rolled gently in the background, followed by organ and flute, as the reflective dish descended to constrain the space, framing the grave.

Marslen returned to Bach and "Seele, deine Spezereien Sollen nicht mehr Myrrhen sein" (My soul, your spices should no more be myrrh), accompanied musically and dramatically by flautist Lauren Crotty; both acoustically unplugged yet reaching every corner of the hall in a florid expression of hope and faith.

A miasmic wrap-around choral sound heralded the next recitative, "Hier ist die Gruft" (Here is the tomb), Skipworth's music bringing a cinematic sweep to otherworldly imagery of a shroud animated by wind — or in Gospel terms "pneuma", meaning both "wind" and "spirit".

One mystery gave way to another in the aria "Sanfte soll mein Todeskummer" (Gentle should be the sorrow of my death), as Charleston extolled divine mercy in high Baroque tones, yearning for the promised one as choristers mimicked sleep.

"Indessen seufzen wir" (Meanwhile we sigh) dawned in gyrating, grinding instrumental and vocal figures filling the hall while choristers awoke as if from death; bold, multi-layered lines channelling and rising beyond Baroque counterpoint to a novel fusion.



Tenor Ry Charleston sings WA Opera's Oratorio. Credit: West Beach Studio

Bach returned in the alto aria “Saget, saget mir geschwinde” (Tell me, tell me quickly), Halleron seeking the saviour through roseate light, asking with Mary Magdalene, “Where may I find him?” — a passionate intensity reflected in the staged meeting of youth and faith.

“Wir sind erfreut” (We are delighted), the final recitative, filled the hall with rumbling piano as choir returned to the galleries; more cinematic sweep from Skipworth with a devotional bent.

At last all four soloists came together on the central podium, with sound ebbing and flowing, undulating like a breeze through nature; the upper register led by Marslen and the lower led by Bigwood sandwiching a rich middle seam.

Bach’s exuberance broke out for the final aria in orchestra, solo quartet and choir, with Van Tuinen vigorously beating time for all elements in a glorious celebration, “Preis und Dank” (Praise and thanks).

Yet Skipworth had the last word with a grandiose, eloquent Amen tolling out in a cadence for the ages, before principals, composer and director bowed to each side of the hall as if to the four winds of Revelation.

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