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Music shines through a stormy year for Melbourne

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AT THE end of 2008, Melbourne's serious music world was engaged in working towards the survival of the Australian National Academy of Music, an institution of significant benefit to both its staff and students, let alone the concert-going public that sees some of its worthy progeny every time the Melbourne Chamber Orchestra hits the stage.

The projected removal of Federal Government funding was eventually rescinded and ANAM survives - so far. This year, a similar conflict has arisen through the consummation of a long-time proxy marriage between the music schools of the Victorian College of the Arts and the University of Melbourne. There was outrage from those at the educational coalface confronted by bean-counting bureaucrats determined to force unwilling partners to the wedding bed.

While this confrontation has almost been resolved, other problems arose. Although few acoustic-climate deniers have found fault with the new Melbourne Recital Centre, its opening months generated mixed feelings. Forget the delay in obtaining a liquor licence; justify as well-intentioned those many programs of operatic extracts alongside chamber music. Harder to ignore was an initial over-lavish and imbalanced disbursement of cash and energy, such as a packed-out concert from the Kremerata Baltica at the Elisabeth Murdoch Hall, followed by a reading of Stockhausen's *Stimmung* performed to about 40 people.

Obviously, the organisers went for variety to put their building through its paces, but only an incurable optimist would present eclectic programs of substantial length starting at 11pm. Still, patrons heard a great many ensembles covering vast swathes of Western art music before the centre's financial troubles hit.

The centre's smaller salon space also succeeds, chiefly because of the audience's non-invasive proximity to performers, although you have to wonder about the resonance-enhancing qualities of the room's extensive air space.

At the other end of the year came the departure of the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra's chief conductor and artistic director, Oleg Caetani. Apparently a divorce by mutual agreement, rumours then emerged of long-standing dissatisfaction from members of the orchestra with the conductor's approach. With a year of his contract to run, Caetani left to the MSO administration the unenviable task of finding his short-term replacements, the problem compounded by the publication of next year's season which included five Caetani-directed series. All of the conductor's 2010 programs have been altered, major Schumann and Shostakovich works replaced by the apparently more marketable Brahms and Sibelius.

While not the box-office gold that his predecessor, Markus Stenz, turned out to be, Caetani was a highly capable and dedicated musician, prepared to take risks to broaden his audiences' perceptions.

As a semi-replacement for Caetani, Tadaaki Otaka is principal guest conductor next year. He gave a well-timed display of his talents at this month's final Master Series concerts, which contained a standout performance of the Brahms Symphony No. 2: a tribute to the conductor's insights, certainly, but also a reminder of the MSO's excellence in the right hands.

One of next year's Caetani replacements, Sir Andrew Davis, directed a memorable Wagner and Strauss program in August while popular guest Yan Pascal Tortelier also brought the orchestra to a high achievement level in June with a vibrant version of Rachmaninov's *Symphonic Dances*.

Countering the administrative upheavals, several other highlights were scattered across the year: the Arditti Quartet's recitals and Thomas Zehetmair directing and conducting at the Recital Centre; Sir Neville Marriner directing the Melbourne Chamber Orchestra in a virile *Introduction and Allegro* by Elgar; the very full all-Handel and all-Purcell nights from the Royal Melbourne Philharmonic under Andrew Wailes; TrioZ's laudably forthright account of Schubert's *Notturmo*; a surfeit of talent in the National Academy's *Piano!* week; Steven Isserlis and Denes Varjon playing all Schumann's works - with extras - for cello and piano duet.

This year the national chamber music competition expanded into an Asia-Pacific event, the local Hamer Quartet taking out their section with the Nibbana Trio from China worthy co-winners.

Melbourne International Arts Festival devotees saw a return of some long-awaited serious music elements, including ANAM's *Seven Words* triptych at St Patrick's Cathedral, a Brenton Broadstock premiere from the MSO, and Calvin Bowman's long day's journey into all of Bach's solo organ music.

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