

Compassion: Chamber Landscapes shows intimacy in a painful world

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Sometimes only artists can make sense of a pained and conflicted world. A case in point is Nigel Westlake and Lior in the powerful orchestral song cycle *Compassion* they composed in 2013: it seems to describe how humanity is divided by religion and has lost “wisdom of the heart” — to quote from one of its lyrics.

In an inspired move, Iain Grandage commissioned them to write a chamber version of this cycle for the Adelaide Festival in his capacity as curator of the latter’s Chamber Landscapes concert series. This new version of *Compassion* — for string quartet, piano, percussion and double bass — turned out to be wonderfully successful. While it obviously lacked the huge multicoloured canvas of Westlake’s original scoring, it created a compact new propulsive energy and a more intimate relationship between instruments and voice.

It had the instrumentalists working hard, especially percussionist Claire Edwardes: she darted back and forth over marimba, wood blocks, bass drum and much else with terrific swiftness and dexterity. The textures Tinalley String Quartet, pianist Daniel de Borah and double bassist Andrew Meisel were able to create were mesmerising, from the slowly swirling nebula of sound in the opening *Sim Shalom (Grant Peace)* to the ecstatic planes of *Ma Wadani Ahadun (Until the End of Time)*.

The vocal part itself was unchanged and, surprisingly, Lior chose to be miked for this small-scale performance. However, the reduced forces allowed him to entwine his gloriously expressive voice even more intimately around and between the instruments.

The beautiful concluding *Avinu Malkeinu (Hymn of Compassion)* felt like a cry from the heart, a plea for a more humanitarian world that rises over differences. The series that Grandage has put together explores the theme of human conflict in well-chosen, mainly modern works.

Born of his experiences of witnessing war-torn Israel, Osvaldo Golijov’s *Tenebrae* received a deeply passionate performance from the Australian String Quartet that simultaneously highlighted its delicate baroque trceries.

Arvo Part’s *Fratres* and *Spiegel im Spiegel*, which Tinalley and the duo comprising de Borah and cellist Sharon Grigoryan played, respectively, served as a mystical salve in their atmosphere of quiet incantation.

The profoundest word, though, came from Bach in “Erbarme dich” from *St Matthew Passion*. Soprano Taryn Fiebig was divinely the right singer for this aria, and she and Tinalley wove a spell of indelible magic on the audience.

Other performers in this series include Anne Sofie von Otter, the Goldner String Quartet, Balanescu Quartet and the Australia Ensemble.

Compassion: Chamber Landscapes. Ukaria Cultural Centre, Mount Barker, Adelaide. March 8 and 9.