

THE AUSTRALIAN

Pianist's restless energy shines



Mark Isaacs's music deserves a deeper listening experience...PHOTO COURTESY JOHNSTON STREET JAZZ

MUSIC

Mark Isaacs

Camelot Lounge, Marrickville

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ERIC MYERS

I can remember a time when the choice between watching Nick Kyrgios at the Australian Open and attending a Mark Isaacs concert would have been agonising. Thankfully, with today's recording technology, one can have both.

Having said that, I wish I could have recorded Isaacs's performance on Sunday night and listened to it later. With extemporised music as complicated as this, involving an amalgam of influences — chiefly from classical music, with occasional tinges of jazz — hearing it live enables the listener to experience only the superficial surface of the music. The deeper meanings which might emerge once the music has germinated in one's mind are not available.

Still, I was faced with the music I heard, and had mixed feelings about it. There is no denying Isaacs's mastery of the piano keyboard, the great intelligence underpinning his music, and the courage to totally trust his own imagination.



Isaacs: there is no denying his mastery of the piano keyboard, the great intelligence underpinning his music, and the courage to totally trust his own imagination... PHOTO COURTESY SYDNEY MORNING HERALD

Isaacs says that, at this sort of performance, he is composing his latest works for piano in real time. If so, I do not believe that most of these pieces would stand up as individual works. An exception was the fourth piece in his second set that began as usual with a lyrical melody accompanied by sparse notes in the left hand. It was so beautiful that it could have been a children's song or a jazz ballad. Isaacs retained its exquisite mood to the end of the piece, despite the distraction of trains rumbling past.

Otherwise what has been described as his "ferocious intensity" was predominant. He would open gently, then transform the music with restless energy, usually resulting in thunderous octaves or chords in the left hand with rippling runs or arpeggios in the right hand. A similar trajectory was adopted repeatedly, culminating in two-fisted attacks in almost every piece. This created an inevitable sameness throughout the program, and much of it was uncomfortably loud. A more perceptive critic than me might have seen merit in this approach.

Isaacs is such an iconic figure in Australian music, much celebrated and rewarded, that I was expecting a more relaxed and urbane performance. A warmer audience may have pushed him in that direction and galvanised the music. But the conditions did not favour him. The constant train noises were a

distraction, while a tense, rather self-conscious atmosphere in the venue prevailed throughout.

[Eric Myers writes (in April, 2023): Mark Isaacs declared himself unhappy with this review, and put it on Facebook, with several comments of his own, disputing a number of things which were said in the review. This post prompted primarily the sort of abusive and ill-informed comments which are par for the course on Facebook.

However, there was one contribution to the discussion which I felt was perceptive and considered. It came from Lindsay Winkler, whom I understand to be a musician and photographer. I reproduce it here because I returned to this post some weeks later and found, to my disappointment, that it had been removed. For the record I reproduce it here in full. Mr Winkler wrote as follows:

“Yeah, every time I've been to Camelot, it's been incredibly tense and self-conscious... In all seriousness, while I doubt it was intended, I think this is a glowing review. It has captured and described, unwittingly, all the elements of a fantastic gig: the intensity and variability (i.e. it was not relaxed and urbane), the exciting complexity (the deeper meanings, that one might grasp at but never fully seize), the bittersweet feeling you get from witnessing a moment in time that can't be captured or repeated.

“I also get the sense the reviewer was a little bewildered, and I think that's another important element of good music, or art: it should be polarising, it should be challenging, it should not try to please everyone, and possibly should not try to please anyone (good art should pose uncomfortable questions).”



Lindsay Winkler ... PHOTO COURTESY FACEBOOK

“Interestingly, I've never noticed the train or plane noise there, but I've always been more interested in a performance with integrity than a super low ambient noise floor at a venue. Anyway, congratulations.”