

# Apcar brings bright, inventive works to life

## Arts

Born in the same year as Benjamin Britten (and also Australian Raymond Hanson), Dulcie Holland's music was well known and widely played in the lounge rooms of young music students but struggled to be heard in the places where it supposedly mattered - major concert halls.

Her music is bright, inventive and shows high craft, and her harmonic language is salted with discreet dissonance but never over-spiced or atonal. After World War II, her genteel style was overlooked, partly because of the shift to avant-garde modernism and partly because she was a woman.

In recent years, several have sought to remedy this. With Ensemble Apex under conductor Sam Weller, Canberra-based pianist Ronan Apcar presented three unpublished works from three decades, alongside music by Daniel Rojas and Nigel Westlake.

Holland's *Serious Procession* for solo piano (1950) began with quiet spiky thoughtfulness building to a climax in a well-shaped formal arc. Daniel Rojas's *La Gran Salsa* (2019 revised 2025), heard here in an ar-

range for piano and string orchestra, is a homage to Piazzolla's *Le Grand Tango* and draws on the brooding energy of South American rhythms.

It began quietly with a sultry piano solo, and the ensuing whistling sounds from the strings increased the steaminess of mood to a point of manic activity. It was a work of twitching, rhythmic energy that was sometimes suppressed and sometimes explosive.

Westlake's *Out of the Blue* (1994) for string orchestra also built to moments of frenetic rhythmic intensity, using repetitive minimalist patterns and quirky string sounds, sometimes rasping, sometimes growling like a creaking door. It posed challenges for Ensemble Apex but Weller chiselled out its demanding rhythmic complexity with confidence and clarity. Holland's *Conversation for Piano* (1954) was in two contrasting movements which each intruded on the other, *Reflective* (impressionistic and supple) and *Emphatic* (rhythmically defined though never overbearing).

The program concluded with a major work of Holland's - her *Concertino for Piano and Strings* (1983), unperformed un-

til Apcar and conductor Leonard Weiss edited it from the manuscript in the National Library of Australia and presented it in 2022.

The concise first movement was built on a short motive that seemed to be constantly urging the music to cheerful exuberance. The finale combined virtuosic toccata-style pianistic figuration with skipping energy from the strings.

Between these came the expressive centre of the work - a slow movement with tolling bell-like sounds and sorrowful cello melody (Rachel Siu). Each movement featured expansive piano cadenzas with Apcar's playing showing facility, sincerity and conviction.