

Concertos on Fire (City Recital Hall)

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Fire licks up violinist Sonja Schebeck's bare arm and flames dance on the tip of her tongue before she extinguishes them with a breath. Her visually stunning double bill, *Concertos on Fire* – which paired Ross Edwards iconic violin concerto *Maninyas* with a brand new work by Chloé Charody – certainly delivers on the promise made by the title.



Violinist Sonja Schebeck in *Concertos on Fire*. Photo © Katelyn-Jane Dunn

Flanked by members of her costumed, interdisciplinary band of musicians/aerialists/fire performers, The Freestyle Orchestra (bolstered by local musicians, under the baton of Luke Spicer, forming the #freestylesymphony, and aided by the subtle ministrations of Piers Burbrook de Vere's sound design), Schebeck breathed fire into Edwards' now over 30-year-old violin concerto, in a vivid performance of movement and aerial performance that saw the soloist spinning above the stage during the first tutti and string players leaping, dancing and tumbling, often with instruments in hand, without ever dropping a note.



Sonja Schebeck and The Freestyle Orchestra in *Concertos on Fire*. Photo © Katelyn-Jane Dunn

Schebeck, a Sydney Conservatorium of Music alumna who in addition to founding The Freestyle Orchestra is a founding member of Nigel Kennedy's Orchestra of Life, gave a blistering performance more than equal to the interdisciplinary challenges, and certainly to Edwards' violin part. While her incandescent sound was compelling throughout, her solo *Intermezzo Quasi Cadenza* was a particular highlight, Schebeck conjuring an almost religious atmosphere. There are perhaps elements of the overall performance that could be refined – there is a lot of preparatory stage activity that sometimes draws focus from the performers themselves, and an unfortunately loud winch motor intruded on what would otherwise have been magical quiet moments – but this was nonetheless a captivating performance.



Sonja Schebeck and The Freestyle Orchestra in *Concertos on Fire*. Photo © Katelyn-Jane Dunn

The spiritual affinity between The Freestyle Orchestra's approach and the ritualistic, dancing figures of Edwards' concerto was finely judged, however the episodic nature of the acrobatic performances didn't always mesh with the larger scale structure of *Maninyas*. This was not a problem, however, in *The Tale of the Firebird*, by Schebeck's long-time collaborator Chloé Charody, who crafted made-to-order music that unfolded in a series of ballet-like scenes. Charody's program is a kind of prequel to Igor Stravinsky's famous first ballet for Sergei Diaghilev's *Ballet Russes*. The Australian composer's take on the Russian legend sees the mythical Firebird (Schebeck as soloist, in a glittering gold headdress) born to dance and fly under the mentorship of her mother (aerialist Gemma McDonald, whose solos on silks and suspended hoop drew gasps from the audience), only to be killed by a villainous Raven (viola soloist Charlotte Fetherston decked out in black feathers) then reborn in flames – with plenty of opportunity for fire and spectacle along the way. Once again, musically it was Schebeck's solo violin moments that were most satisfying – the wild cadenza of the second movement, *Firebird Caprice*, in particular – but she brought an incredible intensity to the fire twirling, joined by members of The Freestyle Orchestra who traded instruments for flames in extraordinary physical performances.



Charlotte Fetherston and Sonja Schebeck in *Concertos on Fire*. Photo © Katelyn-Jane Dunn

Throughout *Concertos on Fire* there was a pixie-like gleam in the eyes of the performers, a sense of personal pleasure in the feats they dispatched on stage – whether musical or acrobatic – and ultimately this was a far more exciting, dangerous, and interestingly programmed experience than the more sanitised circus plus orchestra concerts that have become almost as ubiquitous as film score concerts in recent years. Schebeck and her collaborators managed to channel both the improvisatory joy of a raging party around a bonfire and something of the multi-disciplinary spectacle and magic of Diaghilev's ballets.



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