





## A QUESTION OF TRUST

WRITTEN BY CHARLOTTE WILSON

At their September concert Orchestra Wellington Music Director Marc Taddei launched the opening of subscriptions for 2016. It was a launch with a difference. If you want a good price, he said, sign up now, but I'm not going to tell you what you're signing up for. If you want to wait, then we'll tell you who the soloists are going to be in November, but you're going to have to pay more. And in December you can find out the whole programme but then you're going to have to pay more again.

It's a test of your faith...

**Y**ou have to be pretty confident to test your audience like this, and confident they are.

Orchestra Wellington is having an absolutely corker year. Season subscriptions are up from 270 last year to almost 1,100: walk-ups have increased by the same amount; and they're getting houses of 1,800, which would easily be selling out the Wellington Town Hall. Why? The easy answer: price. Adán Tijerina, the general manager, has slashed the full subscription right down to \$18 a concert. Students fronting up on the day pay just \$12. It's a bold move: but it's not rocket science, he says.

"It's supply and demand: we have a big hall that we need to fill. After the town hall closed we tried a number of different venues that didn't work and we came to the conclusion that we just have to go in the Michael Fowler Centre. And the MFC looks dire with only 500 people in it. Rather than try and sell 500 tickets at \$80 a pop, we reckoned we'd try and sell 2000 at \$20."

It worked. And the blind subs offer for next year is doing even better. It was Adán's idea. It's the sort of thing that airlines do – secret bookings, a mystery location – but as far as we know it's a first in the arts. He

says that he just wanted to get some data on how they were selling, and the best way to find out what was most important was to isolate each factor in the equation. It'd be a pretty complex equation, and I suggest he must be some kind of maths whizz: 'No! I'm just a hustler!' But there's a statistician for the Reserve Bank on the board, and Adán says his eyes lit up when he took it to them – "He said, oh, I love it. This is great."

But it's not just about bums on seats. There's another reason it's working, and frankly, that's great programming. This year's "Six by One" season of the complete cycle of Tchaikovsky symphonies paired with six piano concertos from Michael Houstoun is a winner, with audiences and reviewers alike. It's a massive gesture, this commitment to one composer and one soloist, and I suggest to Marc that it could have been a risk, putting all his eggs in one basket.

"Well, yes, but then I'm a kind of throwing all my eggs in one basket kinda guy. And it's not easy. It's really scary putting out programmes! But if you have a concept that you think is going to be a winner, then it's like high-stakes poker, you just have to go all in. The

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Tchaikovsky is a great story. It's the greatest Russian symphonic cycle ever written, six incredible works the last three of which are just unassailable masterpieces. I love the progression that we get through the six, the sense of drama. There's a lot to stimulate people emotionally and intellectually, by being all-in. That's my approach to programming, and you just have to trust that people are going to come.'

I get the feeling that they'd come to see him if nothing else. Marc is enormously popular with audiences. It's his genuine enthusiasm, and his gift for telling the story behind the music. He does live Q&As on stage – the concerts are broadcast by RNZ Concert, and they wheel out a presenter to interview him – and he does pre-concert talks in the lobby as well. They're packed out. And the orchestra's improved in the seven years he's been with them: impressive, considering that almost all the players have other jobs, and rehearsals are held at the end of the day.

'There's no secret there, it's just time in the saddle. When I began conducting the orchestra they had been doing only two programmes a year, plus all the pit work. I immediately suggested we double that. Now it's six. The orchestra's together more, they see each other all the time.'

'The onus is on me to ensure we are using rehearsal time efficiently', Marc said. 'That is something that the public doesn't see, but that's the conductor's brief, especially the music director's brief, to guide the orchestra to higher levels of artistic achievement. And the only way to do that is nuts and bolts in the rehearsal room.'

This is the first time the complete Tchaikovsky cycle has been performed in New Zealand. 'It came to me in a flash. It was just waiting to be done,' said Marc.

'Michael Houstoun came up with some really good ideas, these five greatest-hits Russian (or Soviet, Khachaturian is Armenian) piano concertos that balance the Tchaikovsky perfectly.'

The sixth concerto is a new commission from

Wellington composer Karlo Margetić, winner of the SOUNZ contemporary award in 2013 and one of the orchestra's three composers in residence, last year they had one resident, one emerging, plus the staff composer who runs the education programme, Thomas Goss.

Marc is adamant about the need to support New Zealand performers and composers, just as he is about the need to be "a good corporate citizen," supporting the wider arts community.

'We really can't be ivory towers, we can't just be an art museum, we need to be an art gallery as well. We need to not only give the classics of the Western canon but also let people get a sense of and digest what's really happening in our own society today. We had a big success with Leila Adu in June and then with Karlo. I gave him the hard word, saying I expect this to be the greatest piano concerto ever written in this country. You're going to be right behind Stravinsky's Scherzo à la russe, and then right in front of the greatest sixth symphony ever written. Good luck!'

Not that Karlo is one to be daunted. He's called it "Melting Furniture", which conjures images of a piano made of chocolate but refers to a number of pitch-bending effects, "like the piano is constantly changing shape, like a reflection in rippled water." That's in December. This month it's the Khachaturian piano concerto, along with an overture by Balakirev and Tchaikovsky's 5th. That's also when Marc will be announcing the soloists for 2016, and the subscription price will go up slightly.

'I can say that there is a theme, but it's not the same kind of cycle.' He said he didn't want to repeat himself.

'I don't want people to feel that the orchestra's a one-trick-pony. It's not as easy as this year, maybe, but it's really popular, it's got a huge draw to it, in my opinion.' ■

*Orchestra Wellington: "Providence," 7 November, and "Pathétique," 5 December, Michael Fowler Centre.*