

PHOTO PROVIDED, WORDS NICK GUROVIC

RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL SON

Almost an hour into meeting Jonathan Henderson, I can't help but continue to admire his eloquence and his ability to chisel his generous comments into print-ready essay. Seated hardly five feet from me, he is an amicably open, talkative and energetic ambassador of the Australian millennial classical music makers. Henderson was only 21 when he embarked on an overseas journey that lasted a decade and enabled him to not only take his performing to a sublime level but also to open his mind to cultures, attitudes and traditions vastly different from Australia.

"Having completed my Bachelor studies in Brisbane I was on the cusp of finding professional opportunities here in Queensland and elsewhere in Australia. I had just started to get a bit of recognition as a player, but I decided to leave that behind and let's say to be a small fish in a big pond again, to be just another flute player amongst thousands in Europe. I wanted to set a bar another notch higher, because back in those days after visiting Europe and hearing the best flute classes in Germany, I felt my flute playing was not yet on an international level. But I was ambitious and desperate to hone my craft further with my flute idols in Europe," Jonathan says. His decision to move to Germany was not a jump without a parachute; he thoroughly explored his options in advance and found the perfect mentor, Felix Renggli in Freiburg.

"My first year with Renggli was just fine tuning, making technical adjustments, learning how to expand the capabilities of my playing in every way – sound, colours, virtuosity...so all the creases were ironed out in the first two semesters with him."

In 2012 Jonathan moved to Tallinn as he was accepted on a one-year trial to the Estonian National Opera Orchestra. His first taste of professional orchestral life was a hard one – *Der Rosenkavalier* by Richard Strauss. "It was terrifying and thrilling and very challenging for the first flute player, but as I found out later my performance in that particular opera convinced the chief conductor and fellow musician to offer me the permanent position," Jonathan recalls.

Over the years in the Estonian capital, Henderson played great operatic works, approximately forty *Nutcrackers*, thirty *La Traviata*, and twenty *La Bohemes* among the other "usual suspects" on the cyclic repertoire. At the same time, outside the orchestra he used every opportunity to perform with chamber groups or to present recitals with a fellow pianist. Also, this northern exposure enabled the young Australian musician to perform as a regular guest principal in Finland's symphony orchestras, and in a wide variety of venues in the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, Poland, England, Belarus and Latvia. "At the time I felt very connected to my surroundings, and in another sense, I felt very much a foreigner, existing in another culture from a point of observation," Jonathan noted in an essay he wrote before returning to Brisbane. As our chat continues, he brings back a memory from his Estonian days to emphasise the need of an artist for permanent soul searching and involvement.

"In spite of feeling restless I knew that I had



to learn more about European style and interpretation, just to give more attention to instrumental aspects which have to be put to the side when playing in a full-sized orchestra. By the end of my third season playing in the opera, I decided to take a sabbatical as I had the rare opportunity to work with another inspiring mentor, Jacques Zoon in Geneva. Under his tutelage, I found a new mental clarity, thousands of new musical ideas, new ways to interpret playing the flute, and space and time to experiment and question what I was doing and how," Jonathan reflects and pauses. Some years later after returning to Estonia, working on his doctoral thesis, he tried to better understand ways to improve rhythmic cohesion between players in a small ensemble. Having completed his postgraduate studies with an instrumental as a major and having played in orchestras, chamber groups and as a soloist, he felt well equipped to take on any piece of music. That illusion evaporated once he faced a situation in Carl Vine's Flute Sonata, which is in Jonathan's words very precise and dense with very complex relationship with metre and cross rhythms across the two players.

"I felt there was a lot of time needed to solve just the issue of playing really precisely together, when no flexibility was permitted, and we could not find good ensemble cohesion between myself and my pianist colleague. I think many musicians in this situation are solving the problem by repetition or trial and error. To me that was unsatisfactory. It inspired me to bring myself to a point, through research, where I could quickly help to overcome these problems. The larger purpose of my investigation was to eradicate those practical issues and allow more rehearsal time focus on really important artistic decisions when dealing with complex music."

In the essay already mentioned he compared his return to Australia to re-entering his past. Asked to elaborate on this, Henderson tells me

that the idea of coming home was almost like a fantasy in his mind. There was no deadline to embark on the return trip though. However, nostalgia took its toll and during the endless winters in the Baltics, he started to imagine his return.

"I didn't want to return until I took in absolutely every experience and inspiration I could. I was happy to be in a position to enter many different cultures and make endless and wonderful new friends. It opened my mind at a time when I didn't have any choice but to become flexible and accommodating, and more sympathetic to the human experience. However, as the time went by, I found it harder to adjust. Every time I moved countries, and I moved at least half a dozen times, it was like starting all over again and re-programming. Of course, this is what we have come to know as the normal life of a musician today, travelling around the world endlessly for concerts and work, but it can be very exhausting, and I started to crave stability."

In the span of the ten years of his overseas engagements, Brisbane's classical music scene had changed dramatically, Jonathan observes. While he was a student the Queensland Symphony Orchestra, Southern Cross Soloists and a few other entities dominated the scene.

"It is wonderful to see that Brisbane has such a rich cultural life nowadays. The number of events in music and the arts in general has tripled and the number of chamber music concerts has grown exponentially. I hope to be able to contribute to the present trends and come up with projects that will attract chamber music lovers to venues that are low-key, unintimidating, informal and inviting to the public, but where the artistic integrity is kept at the highest possible level. I think this is an issue that we need to investigate more in Australia – it is underestimated who can potentially enjoy live classical music. Despite the way it is often marketed, attending a concert is not an experience exclusively for the wealthiest tier of society to enjoy. If we can change this perception, I hope it will encourage a more widespread appreciation. We are all united by the same emotional response to music we hear, there is simply no denying it."

Being an energetic promoter of contemporary works, he is certain that audiences with no education in classical music can still enjoy a modern piece. "We are often quick to blame the audience if a modern program is not well received, and this is a big mistake. If the public aren't convinced, it is we, the musicians who have failed, not them. I am still in the learning stages and I am slowly discovering what Australian audiences are interested in, what really resonates with them. I am trying to understand as quickly as I can, and it will only happen through trial and error." Towards the end of our time together, I am curious to learn about Jonathan's interests not related to music, and his answer is short for the first time since we met. He recently started to run again, he regularly spends times in Brisbane's galleries and museums, and is toying with the idea of starting to write some music if time permits.

"I can't be idle," he declares, and he is ready to go.