

Ohlsson takes up Australian challenge

The old classics die hard, writes JOSH LEESON.

EVER since Garrick Ohlsson was a fresh-faced 22-year-old who shot to international acclaim after winning the 1970 Chopin International Piano Competition, he's been asked about the future of classical music.

Was the centuries-old genre set to die in the face of popular music trends? Would children in the future continue to be inspired to learn the intricacies of Beethoven and Mozart?

Back in 1970 Ohlsson admits he had limited knowledge of the world of classical music - except what was taught at the prestigious Juilliard School in New York - and struggled to answer the question.

However, after more than 50 years of performing across the globe with everyone from the London Philharmonic to the Sydney Symphony Orchestra and winning various awards, including a 2008 Grammy, Ohlsson can confidently answer.

"I do have a great faith, I'm very optimistic about it," Ohlsson tells *Weekender* over Zoom from his home in San Francisco. "I think the kids are better than we are.

"I'm very mature at 75 and still vital enough and active. But the kids coming along seem to play better and have more sophistication and more enthusiasm.

"The problem with these really young players is the market is not infinite in any market for classical music.

"That's always been a career question for everyone; what do you do with all this passion and skill? But I do have a great deal of faith."

Ohlsson says in 1970 journalists would remark that his audience is ageing and he jokes, "they still have grey hair". However, he believes classical music's appeal is timeless.

"People love it and feel they need it in their lives," he says. "They always seem to come along and replenish the flow of appreciators and people who want this music.

"It's a wonderful thing. We still seem

to have audiences everywhere and at the same rate."

Ohlsson, himself, is evidence that audiences still crave the finesse and the beauty of classical music in our fast-paced world.

His piano playing has led critics to dub him as "a marvel of virtuosity" and a "titanic force at the keyboard" and he's often cited as

among the most accomplished exponents of Frédéric Chopin's masterpieces.

Ohlsson is headed back to Australia in June for the first time since 2020 to perform a recital tour for Musica Viva.

The performances will feature two separate programs of Romantic and Impressionist works by Chopin, Franz Liszt, Franz Schubert, Claude Debussy, and Alexander Scriabin.

But Ohlsson remains a passionate advocate for modern classical music, too.

All dates on the Australian tour will feature the world premiere of Melbourne-based composer and music journalist Thomas Misson's *Convocations*.

Musica Viva Australia artistic director Paul Kildea approached Ohlsson about commissioning a performance of an Australian composer.

Ohlsson was sent several compositions from different Australian composers, but the technical challenges of *Convocations*, which he describes as "thunderous and changorous", held the most appeal.

"Tom has written a really demanding, wide-ranging piece which comes from the most meditative slow music to most monumental spine-tingling climaxes," he says.

"I think it's quite brilliant. I've been struggling with it for the last several months, luckily he delivered it on time, which was nice. Sometimes composers feed you the last piece of the page two days before the premiere and it's a bit difficult."

Breaking down a newly-commissioned composition is an exhausting process, but one Ohlsson cherishes.

"In Beethoven if you play a wrong note it sounds pretty wrong, because we know the music so well, but if you're playing late 20th

century or early 21st century music nobody knows what it sounds like, including me," he says. "So it takes a real scrupulous amount of work before I can actually I want this.

"There's notes and notes behind the notes, like there is in a play of Shakespeare. The poetry is not the words, it's the poetry behind the words."

While Ohlsson has recently released an album of Beethoven's piano concertos with the Grand Teton Music Festival Orchestra, he believes it's essential to challenge both himself and his audience with new compositions like *Convocations*.

"We have to remember at the time of Beethoven or Mozart most of the music being written isn't memorable," he says. "It's for later generations to more or less decide.

"Plus we have inevitable, I won't call it conservatism, but the classical music public is a small public in percentages and quite well educated and demanding, usually.

"Yet we all love Beethoven and Tchaikovsky very much, and very often new music is like, 'Take your medicine it's good for you'."

Garrick Ohlsson performs at Newcastle City Hall on June 10.



Garrick Ohlsson will perform Australian composer Thomas Misson's *Convocations* on his upcoming tour. Picture supplied



Garrick Ohlsson has faith in the future of classical music. Picture file