

St George slays the notion of amateur hour in church

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LAST week at a cocktail party at the Art Gallery of WA, an oil and gas sponsor handed over a \$100,000 cheque for a contemporary music tour.

The quid pro quo nature of most arts patronage was on show: grateful artists and a generous corporate donor receiving public praise from the state's arts minister.

Yet one Perth institution sitting outside the corporate circle offers sustained cultural support and surely ranks among the state's most influential, if underrated, art patrons. Over the past two decades, a quiet revolution in the life of St George's Cathedral has brought it alive with activities involving music, visual art, sculpture, architecture and literature, harking back to medieval traditions in Europe that placed churches at the heart of communal cultural life.

The Anglican cathedral is about to make its boldest public art statement yet: this month it will erect an 18m sculpture of St George and the dragon on its front lawn in the heart of Perth's CBD.

Called Ascalon, this church-commissioned sculpture costing \$500,000 is no conservative tribute to the past; it is a bold abstraction in steel and chrome, with the knight's billowing cloak wrapped around a thrusting lance that rises out of a base of black granite, symbolising the slain dragon.

Last year, when the winning design by Perth-born artists Marcus Canning and Christian de Vietri was unveiled, people either loved it or loathed it.

One suspects the controversy pleased John Shepherd, the cathedral's dean, who runs a theological study group called Heretics Anonymous. The brief for the sculpture commission was provocative: "a contemporary representation . . . which would attract, exhilarate and even confront not only the visitors to the cathedral but all passersby."

"I didn't want a sculpture that would look like a man on a horse," Shepherd explains, settling into an armchair in his cluttered study at Bishop's House, next door to the cathedral. "You give more opportunity for insight if a work of art isn't generally understood. As soon as somebody says 'I understand it', the imaginative process dries up. For me, that's like the scriptures: as soon as you start reading them as literal, and not in a metaphorical or parabolic sense, they lose their impetus, their inner meaning."

Such thinking led Shepherd to open up the cathedral's doors in 2000 to The Messenger, US video artist Bill Viola's confronting large-screen video work, staged originally in England's Durham Cathedral. Perth's parishioners were startled to witness a nude male figure emerging from water and sinking back again into the depths. It was a mesmerising sight for Ascalon's co-creator Canning, who remembers standing in the dark recesses of the cathedral. "It was such a powerful work and entirely appropriate to have been set in that context," he says.

Canning, also the director of Perth's annual Artrage Festival, says the cathedral's ambitious sculpture commission also owes much to Shepherd's expansive thinking about the arts. "I've found it interesting because it's not traditional arts management, which tends to be formulaic. It's ambitious and grand in its conception."

Shepherd is pleased that the international competition, which attracted dozens of high-calibre sculptural designs, led them back to Perth. "We spent a fortune on advertising around the world and getting in entries from New York and Tokyo, and we chose a design by two lads who graduated from the local grammar school."

The church relies on donors to support its arts patronage - Perth mining entrepreneur Mark Creasy donated the \$500,000 to create and build Ascalon. Other generous donors support the cathedral's Foundation for the Arts, established in 1997, to allow it to follow in the footsteps of Europe's medieval cathedrals where, according to the church website, "people would gather to watch musicians, actors and dancers tell stories through the performance of mystery plays."

Inside St George's neo-Gothic walls, on any given day or night, you may see volunteers hanging teenage art works, hear talks on literature run by an emeritus professor of English, or a harpist performing a solo concert. Several times a week, boy choristers file in for rehearsals; before long, a "song school" will be erected next door as a rehearsal space for the cathedral's choral performers.

The cathedral's arts fund spends \$260,000 a year on the boys' choir, a consort of professional singers and costly maintenance of the cathedral's three organs. It also pays the salary of organist and choir master, Joseph Nolan, a world-class organ recitalist and former organist for the Queen's Chapel Royal at St James's Palace. "We're the only cathedral in Australia that pays a full-time organist and choir master," Shepherd says.

Shepherd's belief is that the experience of art can be transcendent, but only if it is good art. As a musical scholar himself, his standards are high. Born in Melbourne, he earned a master of sacred music in New York and a doctorate at Cambridge. As chaplain of Christ Church Oxford from 1980-88, he taught Reformation theology and Renaissance music history. Moving to Perth in 1988, he was chaplain at the University of Western Australia, and also taught at its faculty of music.

"I really insist on excellence," he says. "A wonderful theologian called Alexander Schmemmann says that when a church service begins and the priest says 'It's time', we're entering another dimension experience. If we're confronted with mediocrity, we're distracted and wonder if [the singers] are going to get through the piece."

Amateur choral singing has been eliminated. "You think 'why are they singing? Whose needs are being fulfilled?' The answer is the singers' needs, and if that's the case then they should go and join a Gilbert and Sullivan chorus," Shepherd says. "The whole idea of the volunteer choir is that inevitably they let you down, they've got to meet their grandmother at the airport. So we pay all the singers, even the boys."

Having installed Nolan as choir master ("I admire and respect him"), the dean is satisfied that choral standards are among the best in Australia; one music critic described a recent cathedral concert of Faure's Requiem as "perfect". "Our music needs to be as good as what you hear in the Perth concert hall or at Musica Viva," Shepherd says. "And the beauty of the building is also a big part of that insight into the glory of God."

On that score, Shepherd is seeking advice from art experts and Stefano Carboni, director of AGWA, for artists to create large stained glass panels in the upper clear-storey windows. The glass project will be a major undertaking; meanwhile, a bigger task is restoring and rebuilding parts of the cathedral, which was completed in 1880 but was left without a spire when money ran out.

Shepherd enthusiastically unfurls pages of architectural drawings, plans for a nobler, more handsome cathedral. Problems of salt-infested brickwork are being remedied before work begins on a diocesan office block, the vault-shaped "song school" and a plaza that links the cathedral precinct to the rest of the city.

Shepherd and his team have raised \$12 million out of \$15 million to realise their architectural ambitions. "It's a lot of money but I think it's important. It's a way into an appreciation of that which is beyond us, the divine."