

Many strings to his bow

Italian cellist Umberto Clerici makes beautiful music in his adopted hometown



Pictures: Chris Paolich

Umberto Clerici and Leo Schofield enjoy a lively chat over lunch at Lucio's in Paddington.



Soon after I began my three-year term in Melbourne as artistic director of that city's annual arts festival, I took one of its more influential arts practitioners, Nigel Triffitt, to dinner at the Latin in Bourke St, then the town's best-known Italian restaurant.

We talked about the state of the arts in the Victorian capital and about plans for the festival, and during a brief lull in our chat I tuned into the conversations at three nearby tables where all the guests were airing a favourite Melbourne topic — Sydney. It was akin to listening to a mantra — Sydney, Sydney, Sydney. Sydney, they chanted.

"You know, Nige," I said. "You Melburnians seem obsessed with Sydney. Up there all we think about is Italy."

I shared this anecdote with the ebullient Umberto Clerici, principal cellist of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, when we lunched at Sydney's premier Italian eatery, Lucio's in Paddington.

The purpose of doing so

was to emphasise the singular affection and affinity for his country and indeed for all things Italian.

No need, really. He has been here since 2014 and experienced the warmth of his welcome.

Clerici was born in the handsome northern city of Torino, home, inter alia, to Fiat, Alfa Romeo, Lancia, Juventus football club, Barolo, the signature wine of Piedmont, that delicious carb-laden spiced and cured

traction of the gnocchi al tartufo, special of the day. Sig, Cleric and I went no further. "Two of those please and a glass of white for each of us."

Then to the serious chat about music and his career.

Clerici's parents bought his first cello when he was five. It must have been about the same size as he was.

Twelve years later he made his concert debut playing Haydn's D Major cello concerto in Japan. A fully-fledged solo career followed,

a most unusual, possibly unique market survey.

"I actually sampled nine different suburbs before I settled: an apartment in the city, then Annandale, Camperdown, Woolloomooloo, North Sydney, Rose Bay, Potts Point, Zetland and finally Paddington."

Exhausted by the very thought of so many moves we needed sustenance and fell hungrily on the gnocchi over which Sergio shaved a layer of black wafers.

It was probably one of the finest pasta dishes I've had, velvety pellets of finely milled potato anointed with truffle-infused butter and topped with the fragrant shavings of this luxury tuber.

Umberto agrees that it's splendid, even cleans his plate with a torn wedge of bread to remove every last residual skerrick, but offers qualified approval. Very good but not quite great.

He's just bought a block of land outside of Alba, the gourmet capital of Italy, a town justly famous for its even rarer truffles, the white ones, and suggests that the rare whites from Alba are superior to the familiar black varieties from elsewhere in Europe or, in this case, from Tasmania.

Lucio, Sergio and Gustavo

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pork fat called lardo, and the slow food movement.

Given that the founder of this venerable establishment, Lucio Galletto from Liguria, headwaiter Sergio Coniglio from San Remo and newbie Gustavo from Genoa are all clearly Italian, quite a bit of the to-ing and fro-ing conversation was in their native tongue.

Now I have a modest knowledge of the vocabulary, largely derived from twin passions for opera and food, so understood the at-

embracing appearances with major orchestras in St Petersburg, Vienna, Moscow, Zagreb and Istanbul as well as in Florence and his home city.

In 2012 the Sydney Symphony advertised internationally for the position of principal cellist. The ad asked for the oblique "expressions of interest". Clerici expressed the desired interest and landed the gig.

Arriving in Sydney in 2014, he set about deciding where to live and undertook

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agree. We ask simultaneously if he proposes to grow grapes on his Alban patch, for this region gains extra kudos from another great wine, Barbaresco, made from Nebbiolo grapes in an area immediately east of Alba.

He shows us a picture on his phone of the property. It is surrounded on all sides by vineyards, all producing Barbaresco. "They can do the work," he says, "I'll do the drinking."

We throw the switch again to music.

Orchestras are strange, unwieldy beasts. Some players favour a particular composer, conductor and tempo.

Others disagree. Unanimity of opinion is elusive. Then there are conductors, some of whom see themselves as sitting at the right hand of God.

"Managing an orchestra of a hundred or so musicians and their individual egos is rather like trying to organise an anarchy congress," a former manager of the SSO once observed.

When the magic does happen, when conductor and musicians are in perfect harmony and the composition on hand is a masterpiece, the effect can, as many SSO subscribers would attest, be sublime, unforgettable.

For a working musician like Clerici, there are five de-

mands on his time and talent. First, he must lead the cellos, one of the key sections of any symphony orchestra. Occasionally he must appear in brighter light as a soloist.

For his own personal satisfaction, he also loves to play more intimate chamber music with two or three colleagues.

"You can't play chamber music like a symphony, it requires a completely different approach."

Then there is teaching, with which he is actively involved as lecturer on cello at the Conservatorium of Music in Sydney – "talented pupils, too much bureaucracy" – and the odd conducting role when a contracted maestro arrives a day or two after rehearsals begin.

Now in his fourth year in Sydney, he loves his work, enjoys the place and the people ("very welcoming, no resistance"), thinks the orchestra bears comparison with some of Europe's finest, and has perhaps another reason to stay.

At a party after a performance, this boyish, charming cellist met a beautiful blonde, Sophie Given, partner at the prestigious law firm of HWL Ebbsworth. Bingo.

They clicked and were married last April in Turin's historic centre.



They now live in a charming rented house in Paddington, where he is not allowed into the kitchen. "She is the queen there."

They enjoy renting. "If something goes wrong you just call the agent," he says with a grin.

Back in Italy, there's further real estate, that vine-girt, 3000 square metre patch of turf outside Alba, and a dream apartment in Turin.

He shows me further photos, of a splendid 18th-century salone with lavishly stuccoed and frescoed ceiling, currently under restoration, in his Turin apartment.

His two glorious 18th-century cellos, one from Venice, made in 1722, the other in Milan in 1758, will be very much at home there.

Lucio's

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Windsor St, Paddington

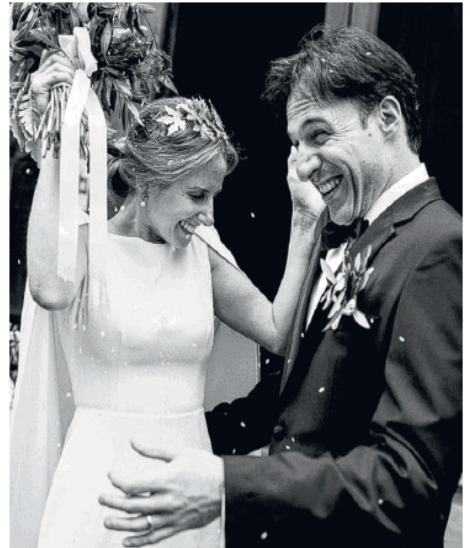
Lunch:
Gnocchi al tartufo

Vitello alla griglia

Fish of the day: confit king trout with stinging nettle puree, roasted Jerusalem artichoke & celeriac foam

2016 Tarra Warra Estate pinot noir, Yarra Valley

From right: Clerici and Sophie Given's wedding in Turin; after the ceremony; Clerici began playing cello aged five.



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