

Master guitarist blurs boundaries

WHAT: International Guitar Festival: Benjamin Verdery; music by Bach, Mozart, Hendrix and Verdery

WHERE: Massey Theatrette, Friday evening

REVIEWED BY: Lindis Taylor

The last evening concert of the week-long International Guitar Festival, which marked the inauguration of Massey University's Centre for Guitar Studies, was perhaps the most remarkable, though I understand the whole week has been a success.

Benjamin Verdery is a superb musician, of a growing band who succeed in blurring the boundaries between the classical and popular realms.

He opened with three engaging Hendrix tunes. Next was his transcription of Bach's fourth cello suite, perhaps my favourite, with its striding opening *Prelude*, in which he showed how its rhythms can be lent variety. I was soon entranced by Verdery's imaginative playing, full of character, dynamic subtleties, yet genuine Bach after all.

Then we were back in the now, with Verdery chatting entertainingly as he and his electronic assistant wired his guitar up and tuned several strings down for his dedication to the Dalai Lama, *Be Kind all the Time*. It involved the use of delay and recording loop, allowing him to pile phrase upon phrase in a build-up of increasing complexity but also of emotional excitement, so that one felt the music, not mechanical trickery, was paramount. The idiom, as with all his out-

REVIEW

put, is contemporary but tonal, shunning the academic avant-garde.

One of the most moving pieces, demonstrating his deep musical sensibilities — in spite of his self-deprecating account of its provenance — was his playing of Mozart's profound *Adagio in B minor* (transposed by Verdery to D minor, as "much more tragic"), K 540. It is a single movement for piano, perhaps intended as part of a sonata. Its heartfelt melodic colour and Mozart's sophisticated handling were miraculously realised.

Finally came his book of 11 etudes. Again, droll anecdotes of its origin in a Staten Island high school with a good guitar programme and a stroppy student demanding that Verdery deliver a promised piece; and how the rest of the students then wanted their own dedicated pieces.

Perhaps not quite the equal of Chopin's two sets or of Liszt's Transcendental Studies, but within their modest ambitions, Verdery's etudes offer a great variety of moods and technical tests. The titles themselves fitted oddly well, like *Let Go, Cause and Effect, Monkey Mind, Start Now* and, finally, *Home is Here* with what I took to be cheerful clicketty sounds of a train at speed.

Verdery is a master guitarist in command of extraordinary skills but also of a compelling musicianship that brings conviction and delight to all he plays.