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**AUSTRALIAN**

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**WORLD**

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**ORCHESTRA**

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**Experience the Brilliance of Australia's Finest**

**Reviews**



## Australian World Orchestra

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### HEATHER LEVISTON

FRIDAY 4 OCTOBER, 2013

Conducted by maestro Zubin Mehta, this constellation of Australian stars produced something very special indeed.



Under the baton of the legendary maestro Zubin Mehta, it was anticipated that this constellation of Australian stars would produce something very special indeed. Without wishing to labour the metaphor unduly, brilliant, shining and other celestial adjectives were inevitably conjured up by the performance given by the Australian World Orchestra (AWO) on Wednesday night.

The AWO's inaugural concert in 2011 was greeted with ecstatic reviews, so expectations were high for the second series of concerts, especially with such an inspiring conductor at the helm. Despite the virtuosity of the more than 110 of Australia's finest classical musicians, drawn from over 47 of the world's greatest orchestras, it is no mean feat to have them work as an integrated orchestral instrument. Considering the positions held by so many of the musicians, things

have the potential to become quite competitive. As principal players in so many different orchestras, would it be a case of too many chefs? Happily, such is the atmosphere of collegiality and the over-riding focus of all concerned on producing the best possible product, that egos are totally at the service of the music. Having watched some of the rehearsal sessions, I was struck by the generous way maestro Mehta himself acknowledged excellent work and the musicians applauded each other's successes.

Being the centenary of the première of *The Rite of Spring*, audiences and musicians have had the opportunity to hear and play this 20th century masterpiece several times this year. In his pre-concert talk with Michael Shmith, Mehta said that he had already conducted three or four performances. For an audience, rather than detracting from the excitement, familiarity promotes a greater appreciation of the subtleties of such a work. Conducting without a score, as is his practice, Mehta gave his full attention to his players, ensuring that dynamic and rhythmic details were closely observed and that the phrasing and emotional architecture were shaped to maximum effect. Without resorting to any untoward theatrical gestures, his clear, precise beat elicited finely woven strands of wind playing in addition to savage visceral power from the full orchestra. Apart from notable contributions from the woodwind, brass and percussion sections (a special bravo for the timpanist), an outstanding feature of the performance was the power of the lower strings.

A beautifully full string tone, whether in the form of a transparent pianissimo or a luxuriant forte was also a characteristic of this performance of Mahler's First Symphony. Having immersed himself in the musical culture of Vienna as an 18 year old, including studying the score with the great Bruno Walter, it comes as no surprise that Mehta was in his element with this work. While the Stravinsky was impressive, it was in the Mahler that the greatest satisfactions could be found on Wednesday night. Beginning with the softest pianissimo, the 'Langsam' acted as a slow-moving meditation on the evocative powers of orchestral colour. As with the Stravinsky, emphasis was placed on the intricate inter-weaving of voices, in all their clarity and variety, exploring texture and establishing mood. The more exuberant celebrations of nature were given a spirited treatment. While there was the very occasional blurred entry from the horns in this movement, there was a great deal of fine ensemble playing from them and some splendid solo work, especially in the finale. The 'Blumine (Andante)', suggestive of flowering or blossoming, is sometimes omitted. Fortunately, it was included as the second movement on this occasion and featured a number of beguilingly played trumpet solos.

This symphony offers an endless stream of delights with its sudden contrasts in mood, swinging from a stamping Ländler to an elegant waltz, from the agony of thwarted passion to the consolation and joys of nature. The AWO rose to the challenge of unfolding them with an abundance of sensitivity and energy, none more so than Diana Doherty, whose oboe solos were a revelation of beauty and musicality. Although she is one of those who have chosen to make her career in Australia, it was plain that her gifts are such that any orchestra would treasure. In

fact, there were so many highlights offered by so many virtuoso members of the orchestra, from eloquent featured solo passages to the way chords were exquisitely blended, that it is impossible to acknowledge them all.

The more cynical amongst us might believe that the overseas contingent of musicians could regard this venture as some kind of holiday junket. In fact, for many it involved considerable expense and sacrifice since the northern hemisphere orchestral season had already begun. Some had already had their scheduled break in Australia and were either obliged to stay on or return for a short time. (Certainly, the vagaries of Melbourne's weather at this time of the year could hardly be an inducement.) The AWO musicians come together because it is a wonderful opportunity to make music of the highest calibre with outstanding colleagues. Anybody looking at the roll call on the program would be astonished to see just what these musicians have achieved – Australians punching well above their weight yet again.

Maestro Mehta referred to them as 'the best orchestra in the world'. The cheers and standing ovation that greeted the triumphant, life-affirming conclusion of the Mahler symphony appeared to confirm his opinion. We are fortunate indeed to have the opportunity to hear it, thanks to the vision of Artistic Director and Chief Conductor, Alexander Briger, and others involved in realizing such an exciting and inspiring initiative.

**Rating: 5 stars out of 5**

**Australian World Orchestra**

**Conductor: Zubin Mehta**

**Hamer Hall, Arts Centre Melbourne**

**2 October**



0:00 / 3:07

## Magic from the super-orchestra

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EAMONN KELLY THE AUSTRALIAN OCTOBER 04, 2013 12:00AM



Zubin Mehta conducts the Australian World Orchestra in Melbourne. Source: Supplied

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### MUSIC

Australian World Orchestra

Hamer Hall, Melbourne, October 2.

**SINCE its inaugural season in 2011, the Australian World Orchestra has been described as an ensemble of expatriate all-stars, a scratch orchestra of fly-in, fly-out instrumentalists, and the musical equivalent of an elite national sporting team drawn together for international competition.**

More accurately, an AWO season is a classical music reunion -- part ceremony, part celebration -- which draws together high-calibre Australian symphonic musicians from leading ensembles nationwide and abroad. In the absence of a permanent national symphony orchestra, such gatherings are a rarity, the closest correlate being annual Australian Youth Orchestra seasons.

Euphoria accompanied the Melbourne opening of AWO's second season, a Hamer Hall audience cheering the musicians' arrival. The appearance of esteemed conductor Zubin Mehta prompted an equally clamorous reception.

As ever, the proof lies in the performance and the AWO again produced a sterling result, on limited rehearsal and despite a demanding program of extreme stylistic contrasts: Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* and Mahler's *Symphony No 1*, works with which Mehta has a long and intimate familiarity.

Australian audiences have had ample opportunity to hear Stravinsky's scandalous ballet score in

this, the work's centenary year, but AWO's rendition proved a tour de force -- riveting in its clarity, intensity, freedom and rhythmic thrusts.

A uniformly high playing standard was coupled with unity of expression, exceptional rhythmic and melodic precision, and flawless balance within and across sections. The woodwinds were remarkable, demonstrating control and timbral nuance in solos and sensitive blends and phrasings in pairings and passing lines.

Mehta's signature was apparent, with tempos brisk, symphonic sonorities brought out to the full, and a fine sense of proportion and shape providing a sophisticated balance between grand arcs and localised details. Here, as in the Mahler, Mehta showed a master's editorial selectivity: knowing which details were integral to the interpretation, ensuring these were given due weight, and elsewhere keeping natural orchestral exuberance under wraps so as to avoid acoustic cluttering and exaggeration of secondary material.

As heart-stopping as the Stravinsky might have been, it was the Mahler that best revealed the depth of talent gathered under AWO's banner.

The first movement's depiction of nature's serenity and majesty was brilliantly realised, myriad strokes of colour and texture applied with a gentle touch.

Following his practice, Mehta interposed the original second movement floral serenade, Blumine, at the appropriate juncture, heightening the work's tension between tone-poem and symphonic forms and styles.

Elsewhere Mehta succeeded in bringing clarity to a wealth of detail and made orchestration adjustments in keeping with Mahler's earlier or intended scorings, not least in allowing the bass section to deliver the solo that opens the funeral march. The final movement was as intense as any I have experienced and brought the evening to a stunning close, rewarded with a sustained standing ovation.

Concert repeated tonight. Tickets: \$130-\$225. Bookings: 1300 182 183 or online.

## MUSIC

Australian World Orchestra

Hamer Hall, Melbourne, October 2.

## Live review: Mehta conducts the Australian World Orchestra

Steve Moffatt | 6.56AM Friday, 4 October

*Mehta puts the Australian musical diaspora through its paces with blistering results.*

**Sydney Opera House, October 4, 2013**

After a long standing ovation Zubin Mehta hushed the delirious Sydney Opera House crowd and, pointing to the orchestra behind him said: “Do you realise what you’ve got here?” After a resounding “yes” from the audience, the 77-year-old maestro added: “Don’t let go of them!”

The 105 musicians he was referring to were the Australian World Orchestra who are performing three concerts – one in Sydney and two in Melbourne – as a follow-up to their dazzling debut under conductor Alexander Briger two years ago. Made up of stalwarts from Australia’s orchestras as well as ex-pats working in Europe, Asia and America, the AWO didn’t put a foot wrong in their sophomore tour and the music just seemed to leap off the page. “They are such fine musicians,” Mehta told *Limelight* before the concert. “Even if they haven’t all grown up with each other, they know the repertoire they are playing inside out and they’ll have such fun playing with each other and being in each other’s company.”

AWO founder and artistic director, Briger, backed by his uncle, the late Sir Charles Mackerras, launched the orchestra in 2011, flying in musicians from all over the world. The sheer logistics of this undertaking are staggering enough, but to hook a big fish like Mehta so soon after its inception defies belief. With his imprimatur on the outfit, who knows what the future holds for this band?

Two seminal works were chosen for this program. Stravinsky’s *Rite Of Spring* revolutionised music when it was premiered 100 years ago. It still thrills with its pounding rhythms and daring harmonies, which still cause a frisson today. This work was Mehta’s choice and it is easy to see why. He brings to it a visceral, exhilarating energy combined with crystal clarity. His rostrum manner is precise but unfussy. Conducting from memory he conveys the sense that the music is the thing. And what a rich opportunity this work provides for an orchestra to lay out its wares. From the opening bassoon solo the woodwind section has a field day – p – this was heady playing from the start. The twin timpanists gave the *Dance of the Earth* section a deeply satisfying air of menace.

If Stravinsky’s masterpiece had never sounded better, more was to come in the second half. Briger had asked Mehta for a Mahler symphony and he chose the First – the *Titan*. Mahler’s debut in this form still amazes audiences – it’s as if he has emerged from the womb fully formed. In his words the work encompasses the world, from the famous tentative cuckoo calls of the opening movement to its joyful climax 53 minutes later. Again, under Mehta’s baton, every note was made to count and this stunning orchestra responded in spades. The strings amazed with a richness of texture regular Sydney concertgoers rarely get to hear.

*Limelight* Magazine dubbed the AWO’s 2011 concert the best of the year by an orchestra. I have no

qualms about doing the same for this 2013 tour – even though the Royal Concertgebouw is waiting in the wings for its late-November tour. In a word: matchless.

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## Orchestra soars to another world

Peter McCallum

Published: October 7, 2013 - 3:00AM

Two years ago, conductor Alex Briger tried bringing together Australia's orchestral diaspora - musicians born, bred or trained here, now working here or overseas - for the equivalent of an Australian orchestra summit. It worked splendidly then, but this performance takes the idea to a new level, achieving higher consistent quality across all sections, united in galvanised focus and musical maturity under the wisdom and experience of Zubin Mehta.

Certainly it was dynamic and exciting. How could it not be with two such masterpieces as Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, and Mahler's First Symphony, written a mere 25 years apart, yet speaking of different universes? But this was much more than an exercise in lighting the brightest fireworks. Even when listening to solos by SSO musicians whose high quality is familiar, there was something about the event, beyond its joyous *esprit de corps*, that allowed players to reach into the depth of their musicianship and draw out phrases of the keenest shape and freshest expression.

In *The Rite of Spring*, it was the cohesiveness of the sound, whether in the wonderfully anarchic first section, the austere sonorities of subdued moments, or in the fearsome brutality of the closing music. This was not a performance like, for example, the Venezuelan star Gustavo Dudamel's, who said his orchestra played on rocket fuel. This, by contrast, might boast of purely human energy with no artificial stimulants.

In Mahler's First Symphony, Mehta included the additional slow movement *Blumine* (which Mahler discarded after early performances), which provided an opportunity to appreciate David Elton's superb trumpet solo, and Mahler's precocious wisdom in cutting it to make a tighter structure. This was a particularly rich brass section, displayed in the magnificent close of the Mahler and in the rich coloured dryer sounds of the Stravinsky. The woodwind section delighted with expressive individuality and tonal depth, the strings for their unity and balance, and the percussion for pointed incisiveness.

Mehta said at the close: "Do you know what you have here? Don't lose it." In one sense we already have, since in true Australian style, this is a FIFO orchestra. However, that certainly makes the homecomings memorable.

*This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/music/orchestra-soars-to-another-world-20131006-2v27a.html>*

## THE MOMENT

# Australian World Orchestra

By REBECCA THURLOW

September 19, 2011



The Australian World Orchestra performs in Sydney. *James Pozarik*

Australian conductor Alexander Briger has music in his blood. His uncle was the country's most famous conductor, the late Charles Mackerras, and both are descended from composer Isaac Nathan. Mr. Briger decided to become a conductor when at age 12 he watched Mr. Mackerras lead the Sydney Symphony Orchestra in Mahler's Fourth Symphony.

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### Tune In: Australian World Orchestra

[Third Movement of Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony](#)

Recording By Australian Broadcasting Corporation, ABC Classic FM. [www.abc.net.au/classic](http://www.abc.net.au/classic)

Now 42, Mr. Briger has conducted a host of major orchestras, including regular performances with the Philharmonia Orchestra and the London Philharmonic Orchestra, as well as the Sydney Symphony. After many years

working abroad, he returned to Australia two years ago with a dream of bringing together Australia's best expatriate musicians with top local players in a single ensemble.

Last month, that dream became a reality with the inaugural concerts of the Australian World Orchestra at the Sydney Opera House. Mr. Briger spoke to Rebecca Thurlow about the challenges of coordinating the event, and his plans to showcase the orchestra to the world.

When I was conducting overseas, I noticed there are so many Australians holding major positions in incredible orchestras around the world. Over a post-rehearsal drink we'd say, "Imagine if we could get all of these players together." But we thought it was impossible.

About five years ago, I was invited to conduct the Japanese Virtuoso Symphony Orchestra. It's the *crème de la crème* of Japanese musicians who come together once a year. I thought if they can do it, then so can we.



'In our first performance when the orchestra walked out, the audience erupted,' says conductor Alexander Briger of the Australian World Orchestra. *Wade Laube for the Wall Street Journal*

About 2½ years ago, I thought more in-depth about the logistics of putting it together. The first person I took it to apart from my wife was my uncle. He said "what a wonderful idea." At first he wanted to conduct it, but he didn't get a chance. He died last year after a battle with cancer.

My family and I returned to Australia about two years ago to set this up and so our three kids could be closer to their grandparents and cousins. I started contacting the various players and they said they'd love to play in it.

That's when we approached corporate sponsors to help pay for the flights and accommodation. We had to raise 1.6 million Australian dollars (US\$1.6 million). The Opera House offered us some dates and then we started to go for it. We held parties and pitched it to wealthy people who sponsored specific players for A\$5,000. My uncle sponsored the principal oboe chair because he started his working life as an oboist.

I approached violinist Richard Tognetti, composer Brett Dean—creator of the opera Bliss—and conductor Simone Young, and we started to gather up all these incredible players. The hard part was the logistics of getting the players to take time off their respective orchestras. We're talking about something like 50 orchestras all around the world. About 90% of the players we asked could make it. In the orchestra there are about 48 expatriates and 48 Australia-based players.

We had four days of rehearsal, six hours a day. We knew it would be tight and the program was tailored to that. We chose works that the orchestra all knew, like Beethoven's Ninth and Tchaikovsky's Sixth.

At the first rehearsal, when Simone first began conducting, we started with Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony. We had a bass section which was one of the best on Earth, full of Vienna Philharmonic and Berlin Philharmonic, Sydney Symphony, you name it. They start that symphony and everybody heard it and went "Wow!"



Members of the Australian World Orchestra gathered on the steps of the Sydney Opera House. *James Pozarik*

It's difficult for the winds because in Europe, they tune to a higher A. So some of the players had to go up a bit up and some down and that means they have to take time to form a perfect intonation. But at the end of the day, it really came together.

The orchestra sounded completely different from any Australian orchestra. It was very European, very rich, bold and quite virtuosic. A lot of the players said it was the best orchestra Australia has produced and it really was in a different

league. It isn't a day job for these people. They really wanted to be there and make it work.

That electricity really comes out to the audience. It's the je ne sais quoi, the X-factor. In our first performance when the orchestra walked out, the audience erupted. They realized these players have gone out and conquered the world, that we should be incredibly proud of what they've achieved.

They wouldn't stop applauding. I've never seen anything like it before, not for an Australian orchestra. The Berlin Philharmonic got a similar response but that's about the only orchestra I've ever seen that got an applause like that.

Oboist Nick Deutsch had to tune the orchestra, blow that A, and he said to me later he couldn't. He was so choked up. He had to take 30 seconds to calm down.

For many of these players, no one in Australia knew who they were. Finally they got the platform where they could perform in Australia. At the end of the performance, it was a total standing ovation. They would not let the orchestra go.

The evenings were a huge reunion. Every player said "we can't wait to do this again," that the event renewed their passion for orchestral playing.

In December 2013, we've got our next performances in Melbourne and Sydney. I can't tell you who the conductor is yet but it is a major, major artist, one of the greats. He's not an Australian but it will change the face of Australian music.

We are going to start it biennially for six years and then we'll try and make it as a yearly event. We'd like to have a major conductor come out every second year.

It's the sort of orchestra the world should see. It showcases the whole world, all these incredible orchestras. We want to take it to Asia, certainly Japan and Beijing. We want to take it to the Proms and the Edinburgh Festival, the Berlin Biennale.

We showed Australia what we have produced. It isn't only sport where we have excelled. It isn't only about Jessica Watson, Sam Stosur and Cadel Evans. We have done the exact same thing in classical music. It's just that you don't know about it. Well now you do.

**Write to** Rebecca Thurlow at [rebecca.thurlow@dowjones.com](mailto:rebecca.thurlow@dowjones.com)

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