

## Simon Rattle's mastery takes AWO to new heights

MURRAY BLACK THE AUSTRALIAN JULY 31, 2015 12:00AM



Mezzosoprano Magdalena Kozena and conductor Simon Rattle with the Australian World Orchestra. Picture: Prudence Upton

Securing the services of conductor Simon Rattle and mezzosoprano Magdalena Kozena for this Bruckner and Debussy concert was a coup for the Australian World Orchestra. Indeed, this third iteration of the AWO is the best yet. The previous performances in 2011 and 2013 were impressive, but this year the immaculate polish and cohesive sound justify Rattle's description of the AWO as a great orchestra.

Rattle endorses conductor Gunter Wand's view that establishing a basic pulse is essential to Bruckner's symphonies.

Everything about this magnificent, perfectly proportioned account of Bruckner's Symphony No 8 was natural and spontaneous.

Conducting without a score, Rattle showed a deep understanding of the work's architecture. The many transitions and changes of direction were seamlessly negotiated and Rattle allowed each passage its moment in the sun while always keeping the longer structural arc in focus.

He created spaciousness and momentum. Ferocious climaxes were generated with thrilling cumulative power, incisive rhythms and forceful unison attack enlivened the energetic scherzo, and his slow-burning realisation of the slow movement was profoundly moving. Textures remained clearly defined, Rattle highlighting the themes without neglecting the surrounding details.

The concert's first half was an all-Debussy affair, opening with the *Prelude a L'Après-midi d'un faune*. The performers' well-judged speeds, delicate sonorities and sensitive phrasing captured its atmosphere of languid sensuality and frustrated desire.

Much interest lay in the next work — the same composer's song cycle *Ariettes oubliées* — for it marked Kozena's Australian debut and the first performance of Brett Dean's orchestration of the piece.

Unfortunately, the performance only partially satisfied. For much of the time, Kozena was hard to hear because of her lack of projection and inconsistent balances between singer and orchestra.

When her voice did cut through, she displayed focused clarity, a warmly appealing timbre and good sense of line.

Dean is a masterful orchestrator. Shimmering textures and evocative colours evoked an impressionist sound-world and his vibrant setting of *Chevaux de bois* recalled Debussy's *Fetes*.

## **Australian World Orchestra**

**Conductor: Simon Rattle. Concert Hall, Sydney Opera House, July 29.**

*Sydney Opera House, tonight. Tickets: \$89-\$269. Bookings: (02) 9250 7777 and online. Hamer Hall, Melbourne, tomorrow. Tickets: \$99-\$349. Bookings: 1300 182 183 and online.*