

Australian World Orchestra – Conducted by Alexander Briger

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Michael Shmith (</abr-arts/author/2643-michaelshmith>) Monday, 29 July 2019
Published in ABR Arts (</abr-arts>)

Once in a while (more or less annually), Alexander Briger brings Australia's orchestral musicians home from Europe, the United States, and other international and national playing fields for a cross between a concert, a jamboree, and a school reunion. It's irresistible, and if there's one thing that emerges from every AWO performance, it's that pervasive sense of release and joy, always underpinned by dedicated and serious playing. There is never any sense of performance by rote, with heads buried in the music and let's get this symphony done and dusted and go to the pub. Really, if you think about it, the Australian World Orchestra is a sort of upmarket jam session. Or, as Irving Berlin presciently had it:

Come on and hear, come on and hear, Alexander's Ragtime Band.
Come on and hear, come on and hear 'bout the best band in the land.
They can play a bugle call like you never heard before;
So natural that you want to go to war.

Thank heavens, though, for peacetime.

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Recent AWO concerts at home and abroad have had some illustrious conductors, with Zubin's Ragtime Band, Riccardo's Ragtime Band, and Rattle's Ragtime Band — Simon Rattle, late of Berlin and now the LSO's music director, referring to the AWO as 'one of the great orchestras of the world'. 'Look after it,' he urged. One can only agree.

On Friday night, the platform was occupied by a plethora of Australia's finest. Wherever you looked, there was someone you knew or someone you remembered from times past: speckled here and there were many players from the Melbourne Symphony, the artistic director of ANAM on oboe, and an assortment of concertmasters, principals, associate principals, professors, and lecturers. A collegiate spirit, to be sure, but also a flexible one, complete with changes of concertmaster and string-section leaders and player positions.



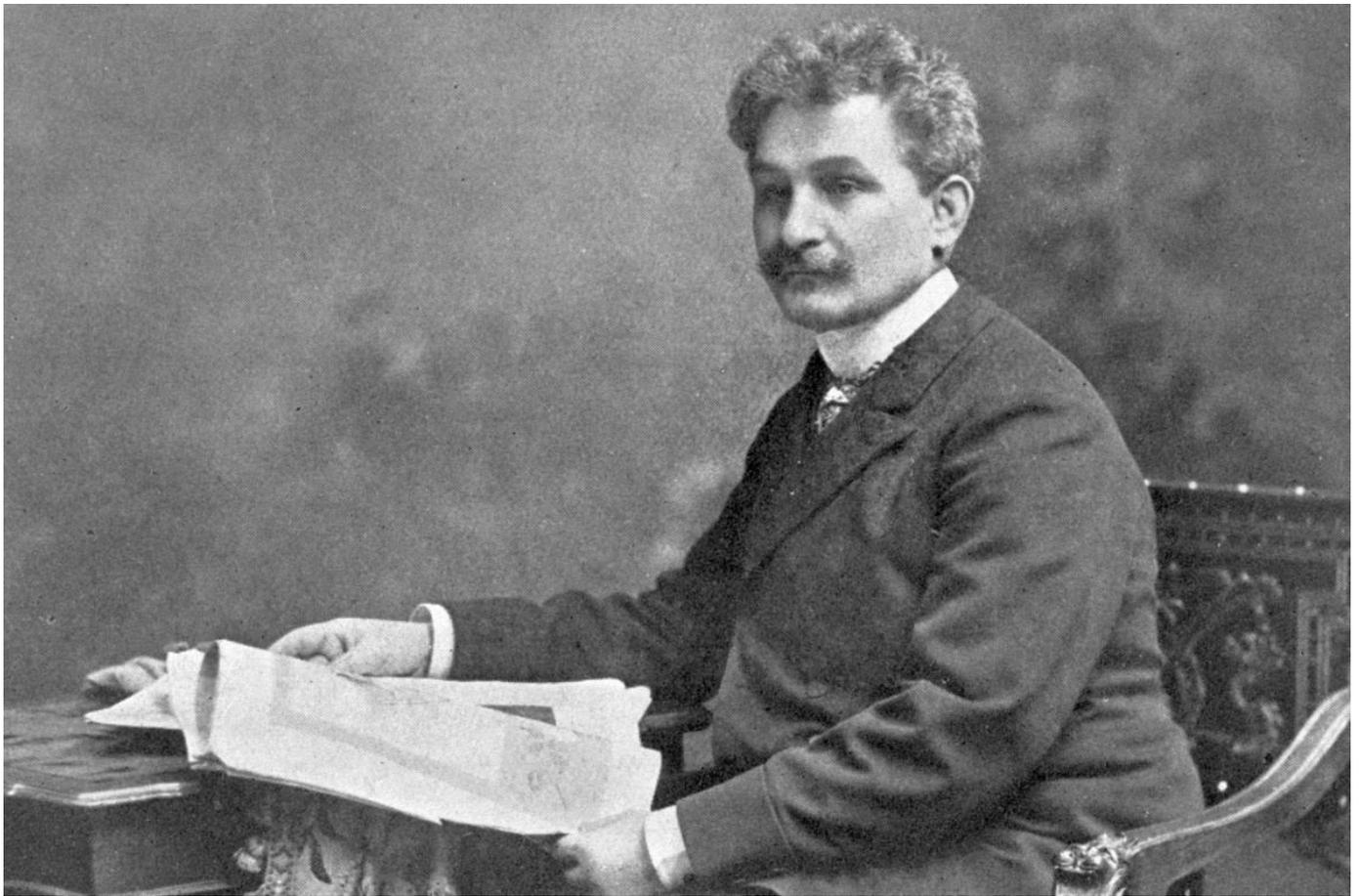
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Alexander Briger conducting the Australian World Orchestra (photograph by Heidi Victoria)

This concert was under the fine and confident control of the AWO's chief conductor and artistic director. Briger, conducting entirely from memory, gave us a program of three very different works, each of which brought particular challenges for the performers as well as the audience: Nigel Westlake's *Flying Dream* (2016); Leoš Janáček's *Taras Bulba* (1916); and Jean Sibelius's *Symphony No.2* (1902).

The Westlake is a reworking of his score for Robert Connolly's 2015 feel-good film *Paper Planes*, which told of a twelve-year-old boy's passion for flight and his determination to win the paper plane championships in Japan. More of a short hop than a long haul, *Flying Dream* is light and airy, yet places considerable demands on its relatively large orchestra, which included wind, strings, a battery of percussion and solo instruments. The piece is neither too obvious nor portentous, but instead reflects Westlake's ingenious tonal and dynamic hallmarks. Afterwards, for some reason, the composer missed his own cue and did not take a bow. He certainly deserved one.

The Janáček was broadly and sensitively performed. Inspired by Gogol's short but epic prose work, *Taras Bulba* is idiosyncratically effective and jagged portrayal of the Cossack hero who died at the stake, a fiery fate reinforced in the conclusion's ringing bells and thunderous organ chords (alas, in this instance, a reminder that Hamer Hall really needs a new organ; even so, presumably on a portable instrument, Stefan Cassomenos coped valiantly). The two earlier movements, which relate the deaths of Taras's two sons, Andrei and Ostap, were equally telling, with those quintessential Janáček sonorities to the fore. Although not performed as often as the more popular *Sinfonietta*, *Taras Bulba* is just as demanding and rewarding a piece. The audience went wild.



(/images/ABR_Arts_2019/August_2019/Janáček_ca_1890.jpg)
Leoš Janáček, circa 1890 (photograph via Wikimedia Commons)

The Sibelius was magnificent, and a true showpiece for the orchestra (the shining brass! those growling, almost subterranean lower strings!) as well as what should become a calling-card for its conductor. It was performed with measured assurance, and, from the very start, an unerring feeling of inner strength and solidarity – qualities that in themselves seemed to challenge the composer's famous comment on the first movement: 'It is as if the Almighty had thrown down the pieces of a mosaic for heaven's floor and asked me to put them together.' By the final movement, with the triumphant return of its earlier themes, the conclusion was mighty, but never bombastic.

There was no encore. After such a performance, that would have been superficial. How telling, though, of the palpable camaraderie that the players all embraced each other before leaving the stage. It was that sort of occasion.

The program was repeated the following night in Llewellyn Hall at the ANU, Canberra. Curiously, there was not a Sydney performance. That is Sydney's loss.

The Australian World Orchestra, conducted by Alexander Briger (<https://www.australianworldorchestra.com.au/whats-on/australian-world-orchestra-conducted-alexander-briger-melbourne-26-july-2019>), performed at Hamer Hall at the Arts Centre Melbourne on 26 July 2019.

Published in ABR Arts (/abr-arts)



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Michael Shmith is a Melbourne-based writer and editor. He edited *The New Pocket Kobbé's Opera Book* with George Lascelles, the seventh Earl of Harewood. He is currently writing the history of Cranlana, the Toorak home bought by Sidney and Merlyn Myer in 1920.

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