

Awesome orchestra greeted with whooping and cheering

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Australian World Orchestra conductor Alexander Briger... conducted the entire program from memory. Photo: Peter Hislop

*MUSIC / Australian World Orchestra. At Llewellyn Hall, July 27. Reviewed by **CLINTON WHITE***

SUCH was the anticipation for the Australian World Orchestra's Canberra debut that there was palpable energy in the audience.

The orchestra's men, resplendent in white ties and tails, and women, in elegant black, filled their sections in orderly precision, standing to acknowledge the sustained applause.

Whooping and cheering greeted the entire 93-strong ensemble when co-concertmaster, Natalie Chee, appeared, and doubly so when Alexander Briger, who conducted the entire program from memory, came to the podium.

This wholly-Australian orchestra features players who are at the top of their game – principals from major orchestras and music schools all over the world, including Australia. One might ponder how many might have studied at the ANU School of Music? Especially pleasing was that Canberra's own Max McBride was one of the eight double basses, taking the principal's chair in the second half.

Despite the only once-a-year gathering of these musicians, the AWO's sound was powerful but warm and rich, expansive but entirely enveloping. With the forces at hand, the depth and quality of tone was luxurious in the gentlest of passages and boldly potent in the muscular ones.

This was the ultimate in teamwork. At one moment, there was unanimity in ear-bending power, while at another a solo trumpet, or flute, or tympani, or oboe, would stand above while the remaining 92 players provided solid but beautifully measured and nuanced support, and at still another the whole ensemble would play so softly as barely to be heard but still with a presence to hold the audience breathless.



The Australian World Orchestra performs its Canberra debut at Llewellyn Hall, Photo: Peter Hislop

Such it was through all three of the works, even with their disparate styles. Australian composer, Nigel Westlake's "Flying Dream", written only three years ago, is the re-working of his film score for "Paper Planes", the story of a 12-year-old boy's dream to compete in the world paper planes championships. It remains very filmic in style, and the orchestra certainly gave it flight.

The Czech composer, Leoš Janáček, straddled the romantic and early 20th century music styles. He wrote his three-movement work, "Taras Bulba", aka "Rhapsody for Orchestra", right across World War I. A programmatic piece, inspired by Russian author, Nikolai Gogol's novella of the same name, it is an intense, dark and worrying look at death, war and love. The AWO's performance was faithful to those elements, leaving, perhaps, a troubled audience to contemplate during the interval.

Closing this extraordinary concert was the Finnish composer, Jean Sibelius' masterful Second Symphony, which premiered in Helsinki in 1902. It would tax any orchestra but is perfect in its romanticism for a large ensemble, such as the AWO, this time lead by exuberant co-concertmaster, Daniel Dodds. As in the Janáček, the AWO delivered brilliantly on its inherent darkness, then rising through the familiar tune in the magnificently sweeping strings and fanfaring brass, seemingly dripping off the walls, to an uplifting and triumphant conclusion.

Almost as one, the audience rose to its feet for sustained applause and multiple curtain calls for the orchestra and its conductor. In the after-concert party, Briger said: "This Canberra audience was awesome". Perhaps the Australian World Orchestra will be back.

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