

# LIMELIGHT

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reviews

## Australian World Orchestra

An ebullient evening of excellent music making, conducted by AWO founder Alexander Briger.

Hamer Hall, Arts Centre Melbourne

Reviewed on July 26, 2019

by [Tony Wray](#), on July 28, 2019

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Gathering together the best Australian instrumental players from around the globe, the Australian World Orchestra is now such a fixture in the musical life of our country that it is somewhat startling to be reminded that it was formed only nine years ago. During that time, the quality of its performances has impressed not only the Australian public but overseas audiences and a number of legendary conductors.



Alexander Briger and the Australian World Orchestra in 2016. Photograph © Anna Kucera)

For this year's concerts the orchestra was conducted by its founder, Alexander Briger, in a program featuring works by Westlake, Janáček and Sibelius. Westlake's *Flying Dream* (drawing on material from his score for the film, *Paper Planes*) was an appropriately upbeat curtain-raiser. Responding enthusiastically to the music's various textures, the players delivered a polished account, giving plenty of impetus to the generic film-score rhythms and shaping its lyrical elements with elegance.

Briger has long had a love of the music of Janáček, something he had in common with his uncle, the late Sir Charles Mackerras. How fitting, then, that Briger should share his expertise in a welcome opportunity to hear the rarely performed symphonic poem, *Taras Bulba*. This colourful score was also a good choice for this group of highly skilled players, requiring not only virtuoso technical facility but an acute sense of effective ensemble.

Alternating moods of tranquility and foreboding were well established in the first movement, led by a beautifully coloured cor anglais solo from Rixon Thomas. The AWO's rich body of string sound served the music well, effectively communicating its rising tensions. Co-concertmaster, Natalie Chee also contributed some fine solos along the way. Both the experience of the conductor and the players paid dividends in Janáček's chaotic opening to the second movement; the pizzicato was clearly delineated against the other wind elements.

Briger was clearly in his element in the work's apotheosis, eliciting an impassioned response from his forces, and evoking *Bulba's* final admonition to have a "damn good time", even as he is condemned to death at the stake. There was no doubt that the AWO was indeed revelling in this intricate yet rewarding score, even if its inspiration is the story of a brutal man who would appeal to some of our latter-day demagogues.

The only thing taking away from this exhilarating performance was the continuing and embarrassing lack of a pipe organ in Hamer Hall, a situation that the Arts Centre management seems to be content to ignore. Stefan Cassomenos dealt valiantly with an electronic appliance, but I could only imagine in my mind's ear how much more thrilling the finale could have sounded.

Sibelius' Symphony No 2 brought the program to an ebullient close. Equally rewarding for players and listeners alike, this well-loved work concentrated the energy and goodwill of all present. As with the rest of the program, Briger conducted from memory, directing his attention to major entries and encouraging his already willing co-conspirators.

It was a pleasure to hear the composer's often densely layered rhythms clearly delineated. Pleasure also abounded in the admirably blended wind playing (so pivotal in this work) and the extraordinarily lush string sound which delighted in every register. The brass, of course, needed no encouragement to add their heft to the finale, crowning a glorious evening of music making by friends. Co-concertmaster Daniel Dodds exemplified the ardour of the players who produced a Sibelius Second the likes of which Melbourne will probably not experience for some time to come.

Melbourne was particularly well represented in this year's iteration of the AWO, with nearly a quarter of the 90 musicians involved working at least some time in the city. Regular Melbourne concertgoers may have been surprised to see Melbourne Symphony Orchestra Principal Cello, David Berlin in the very back of the cellos in the first half, but in the sharing nature of the band he led the cellos after interval.

Briger's vision to bring the best Australian talent together is a wonderful reminder of our enormous artistic wealth and should be a source of hope and pride for many years to come.

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The AWO plays the same program tonight at Llewellyn Hall, ANU, Canberra at 7.30pm. The AWO Six plays at Sydney's City Recital Hall on July 30

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