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

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.

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 reveling 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.

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.
Rising Tsar: Taras Bulba

Love, torture and death are all vividly painted in Janáček’s rhapsody for orchestra Taras Bulba. Australian World Orchestra Artistic Director and Janáček specialist Alexander Briger tells us about the Czech composer’s Russian obsession and why his retelling of Gogol’s bloody tale is one of his greatest masterpieces.

July 1, 2019

The July 2019 issue of Limelight is on sale

Ermonela Jaho talks about Anna Bolena, we learn the true story behind Come From Away, and Nico Muhly discusses his three Australian commissions.

June 28, 2019

2019 Art Music Awards to honour Richard Gill

The awards have renamed the Award for Distinguished Services to Australian Music in memory of the late music educator and conductor.

May 17, 2019

David Robertson on two composers’ common ground

The Sydney Symphony Orchestra’s Chief Conductor tells us about recording the orchestra’s new Westlake and Reich disc, Limelight’s Recording of the Month in May.

May 16, 2019

Alexander Briger: What Makes a Conductor is Personality

The Australian conductor tells us about growing up in a musical clan, founding the Australian World Orchestra, and reducing the work load to better enjoy performances and time with his young family.

May 14, 2019

Review: Music from the Movies (Sydney Philharmonia Choirs)

A well-chosen program of music from film that celebrated the power of the human voice.

May 2, 2019

The May 2019 issue of Limelight is now on sale

Inside the issue: Ute Lemper, requiems to die for, Rossini’s Il Viaggio a Reims, ZOFO’s new Pictures at an Exhibition, the Bolshoi Ballet and more.

April 30, 2019

Read the May 2019 issue of Limelight online

Featuring Ute Lemper, requiems, Rossini’s Il Viaggio a Reims, ZOFO’s new Pictures at an Exhibition, the Bolshoi Ballet and the AWO’s Alexander Briger.

April 4, 2019

Review: ActewAGL Llewellyn One (Canberra Symphony Orchestra)

An excellent, fleet-footed performance from Diana Doherty, Jessica Cottis and the orchestra.

February 27, 2019
Review: Root Position (Selby & Friends)

A top notch trio puts down some roots.

February 15, 2019
Chamber, Chamber, Classical Music features

Kathryn Selby on trios with friends

Pianist Kathryn Selby tells us what she looks for in musical friends ahead of Selby & Friends' Root Position tour.

February 9, 2019
Classical Music, Orchestral, Orchestral Live Review

Review: 2019 Season Opening Gala (Sydney Symphony Orchestra)

The SSO goes wild in a festive season opening gala to mark the start of David Robertson's final year.

January 23, 2019
Classical Music features

Matt Withers: Plenty of Pluck

Keen to raise the profile and expand the repertoire of the classical guitar, Matt Withers formed the Australian Music Composition Competition, and has recorded the 2018 winning works on a new album.

December 11, 2018
Classical Music features

Remembering Richard Gill

The beloved Australian conductor and music educator, who died of cancer in October, meant so much to so many across the music industry and beyond. Those who carry on his legacy share their stories.

November 22, 2018
Classical Music, Orchestral, Orchestral features

The Sydney Youth Orchestra’s all-Strauss concert to honour Richard Gill

SYO Chief Conductor Alexander Briger remembers the orchestra’s inspirational former chief and asks why youth orchestras don’t do more opera.

October 25, 2018
Orchestral news

The Australian World Orchestra announces its 2019 season

Artistic Director Alexander Briger will lead the orchestra in some of his favourite works, in concerts in Melbourne and Canberra.

Subscribe

Explore our Subscription Options

Subscribe, renew or give Limelight as a gift and you could win a night out in Melbourne with the Australian World Orchestra.

Latest Issue
Read the July 2019 issue online

This issue includes features on Ermonela Jaho, Nico Muhly, Nicholas Carter, Come From Away, Janáček, and Paul McCreesh's fantasy coronation.

Competitions

View current competitions

Enter to win tickets to the latest productions around Australia and films on the big screen.

Back Issues

Explore the limelight archive

Missed an issue of Limelight? Subscribe to gain access to our digital archive of back issues.

Featured Festival

AFCM 2019

Read our complete coverage of The Australian Festival of Chamber Music, July 26 – August 4.

New York
Read our insider guide

From the glamour of the Met and the buzz of Broadway to classical music hideaways and, yes, even some free stuff, Limelight's insider guide aims to be everything an adventurous cultural tourist needs.