

THE SATURDAY PAPER

MUSIC

Under the disciplined baton of founder Alexander Briger, the Australian World Orchestra played an impressive concert of works by Westlake, Janáček and Sibelius. By *Peter Craven.*

Alexander Briger and the Australian World Orchestra



The Australian World Orchestra's concert at Hamer Hall, Melbourne.

CREDIT: HEIDI VICTORIA



It's a funny business for a critic to find himself confronted with an art form of which he is an illiterate fan faced with the prospect of writing about it not as a feature writer, conveying information, but from the judgement seat whence a performance is recollected and assessed. Perhaps a theatre critic can make his way, at a pinch, with opera, where the end is dramatic, but with classical music proper the winds of surmise have to suffice.

Last Saturday night saw the latest concert by the Australian World Orchestra, in which they performed first Nigel Westlake's *Flying Dream*, full of the colour and motion, the reverberation and gesticulation, one would associate with a piece partly derived from the film *Paper Planes*. Then came the bedazzling and confounding rhapsody by Janáček, *Taras Bulba*, that translation to another sphere, rich with sonority and instrumental extremity, by the great Czech composer: Janáček's enraptured translation of Gogol's novella, a work in which eviscerating blood and gore and ghastriness (encompassing anti-Semitism and torture) somehow yield an improbable ripping yarn of a masterpiece.

After the interval, we had the second symphony of Sibelius, a man who outlived Janáček by 30 years to hear himself recorded by Toscanini. In this work, themes rise and fade and come again with a resurrectionary vehemence that made some dream of Finnish independence, though the symphony apparently has its origin – and Lord knows it sounds literary enough – in some apparitional epiphany when the composer saw Don Juan (Giovanni, as we say, alert to musical history) confronted with the card of the figure of death.

And all this was performed not with some visiting conducting overlord of vast fame and reputation such as Simon Rattle or Zubin Mehta but by Alexander Briger, the man who founded this walking paradox of an ensemble, a *stagione* orchestra aiming for the highest level of articulation and co-ordination. It's made up of some of the greatest musicians scattered around the world who still – at some level of origin and identification – call Australia home.

The impression left by the performance at Melbourne's Hamer Hall was pretty grand and in no way impeded or undersold by the fact it was conducted by Briger, who happens to be the nephew of the late Sir Charles Mackerras, the most eminent of Australian conductors. Mackerras bequeathed to Briger his Janáček scores, but also seems to

have left him, as an inspirational legacy, the idea of an orchestra that could be national in origin and in commemorative location but which would encompass the world.

It's one of those odd facets of our cultural history that the former minister of the arts, George Brandis, managed to back the Australian World Orchestra when other ventures such as Maria Vandamme's Melba classical recording company or Robyn Nevin's utterly sane and necessary dream of a national theatre company with the supervening authority of the Australian Ballet or Opera Australia – something neither the Sydney nor the Melbourne theatre companies come within cooee of – got nowhere.

But we should be grateful the orchestra somehow survived. It plays with what sounds, to amateur ears as well as expert, a matchless precision edging on grandeur. And if that seemed a touch more manifest with the great conductor of La Scala, Riccardo Muti, doing Tchaikovsky and Brahms last year, it remained true of Alexander Briger in 2019.

BRIGER CONDUCTED WITH GREAT WARMTH AND VIGOUR AND WITH AN EXEMPLARY SENSE OF UNITY ... IT WAS HARD TO DOUBT THE PASSION AND THE FINISH OF THE WHOLE CONCEPTION.

It was certainly a jubilant audience in Melbourne. There was Lady Potter, whose devotion to the arts stretches back long enough to defy human memory, with Sir Jonathan Mills, whose great trail of achievement in Edinburgh earned him his knighthood. There were members of the Mackerras family in the audience and it was good to see the most cultivated of Australian arts editors – a superlative opera and music critic – Michael Shmith looking so debonair and exhilarated by a performance. And why not?

The Westlake piece was a thing of charm and shifting colour, full of moody gestures and teasing ones, but the orchestra under Briger performed it with a real feeling for its elegance and nonchalance, its adoption and discarding of gestures and poses, its deliberate election for style.

The Janáček, of course, is a weightier thing by far and Briger used it as a kind of calling card to mark himself as the natural successor to Mackerras. The work itself, this tumultuous tone poem concentrating with spectacular contrasts the dramatic intensity of Janáček's weirdly inspired pan-Slavophile vision, comes with the in some ways dreadful, in some ways gorgeous, weight of Gogol behind it.

It was Pushkin, wasn't it, that Byronic figure who outshone Byron by becoming Russia's answer to Shakespeare, who said when he leafed through Gogol's *Dead Souls*, "God, how sad Russia is."

And never in the history of the world has a stretch of narrative fiction been a greater testament to the principle (beloved of Benjamin and Sontag) that the history of civilisation is always at the same time the history of barbarism than *Taras Bulba*, which is both a horrifying yarn that seems to encompass and endorse barbarity, and a poignant work of art.

The first movement of Janáček's rhapsody presents the death of the old warrior Taras Bulba's son Andrei at his father's own hands. The boy defies his father and fights for the Polish enemy because of the princess he loves. Then he is cowed and falls to his father. The lovers are characterised by lyrical use of horns and strings, the wrath of the father concomitant with the growl of the trombone. Trumpets convey the rage and sweep of battle. Everything is densely, dramatically economical, and Briger ensures that every jot and tittle of this intensely moody music – which reflects a literary original that has no coherence save an overwhelming emotional coherence – is rendered with superb inflection.

The second movement – where the loyal son Ostap meets torture and death, ending with a desolated cry to his missing father, which meets with an answer from the old man – uses a lone dragging motif, the wild dance rhythms of the rejoicing enemy and then the great cry from the altitude of the clarinet.

In the final movement great bells ring and Taras's weird, almost incredibly realised cry for the Orthodox faith is written for brass and organ. It's a pity a group as distinguished as the Australian World Orchestra has to cope with the makeshift organ of the Arts Centre, an ersatz electronic affair with which Stefan Cassomenos copes gainfully, though there is necessarily a loss.

The Sibelius second was performed with a real amplitude but with an accompanying tightness. Everyone notes the way the composer said, "My second symphony is a confession of the soul" and that Sibelius jotted down a vision of Don Juan meeting a strange visitor over and over again – how he tried to make the visitor laugh, but when no joke drew a response and the figure simply started to sing, the old roué knew he was in the presence of death. We're told Sibelius used a three-note motif recurrently, first with a pastoral moodiness, fleeting and evocative, then with an exhilarating soaring sense of the power of that which is risen at the conclusion, as if the idea of the nation and the idea of Christ formed a fated transfiguration.

How does a mob of musicians encompass that kind of majesty and immensity?

All we can say is very well. Briger conducted with great warmth and vigour and with an exemplary sense of unity. Some thought the transitions were too abruptly registered, but it was hard to doubt the passion and the finish of the whole conception. Briger does seem to have, like Mackerras, a sense of structure and a power of drama and visualisation. These give a needful clarity to this work, which begins in a lyrical mode of indeterminacy and ends resplendently with a vision that outstares death.

Better judges than me seem to think so. I felt in the presence of a massed talent under a top-notch conductor who could translate feeling with great precision.

This article was first published in the print edition of The Saturday Paper on Aug 3, 2019 as "World of our own".
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