

Australian World Orchestra gives rare debut for Australian symphony



Review: Australian World Orchestra, Sydney's City Recital Hall, 3 June

A recital by the [Australian World Orchestra](#) is always an event, but this one was made doubly so by the rare premiering of an Australian-composed symphony.

Celebrating its 10th anniversary with founder Alexander Briger at the conductor's podium, the AWO comprises a selection of the best Australian orchestral musicians working both at home and abroad.

Obviously in the past year it's been difficult for many of those expatriates to come home, so the 52 musicians present on this night made for an AWO about 30-odd players below full strength (the [renovations](#) at the Sydney Opera House Concert Hall, necessitating a move to the much smaller stage of this venue, didn't help either).

What they lacked in number they made up for in the passion and affection with which they performed Paul Dean's *Symphony*, a commission from Briger so named because the Queensland composer thought he would "[sound like a wanker](#)" if he affixed a number to it.

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The lack of pretension was evident from *Symphony's* literally stirring opening, a sustained murmur evoking dawn in the bush, with woodwind players completing the immersive experience by parping birdsong from the balconies.

Growing volume, pining lines and dissonance hinted at ecological threat, and heavy tympani to end the third movement in devastating fashion seemed to confirm it. A highly expressive conductor on even the gentler passages, Briger looked like he might be overcome by some moments of Wagnerian maximalism.

But then increasingly long, even triumphal lines in *Symphony's* last movement gave a glimmer of hope.



Alexander Briger conducts Australian World Orchestra at City Recital Hall on June 3, 2021. Ken Leanfore

The symphony is the composer's ultra-marathon, and Dean's work felt as big as life itself. One did not go away whistling any of it, but the experience lingered nevertheless.

In a program that may have defeated lesser musicians, the AWO then played an entire other symphony, Robert Schumann's 2nd, after interval.

Like Beethoven's *Coriolan Overture* which preceded Dean's *Symphony*, the Schumann was something of an intense, at times strident affair. So it was nice to have it preceded by some lighter relief - the AWO

being joined from young musicians from its education programs to
assay one of Johannes Brahms' *Hungarian Dances*.

The standard was high, and combined with having seen an Australian
Symphony one felt would stand the test of time, it was a night for
renewed hope in local orchestral music.

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