

Australian World Orchestra



Formed in 2011 and now celebrating its 10th Anniversary, the Australian World Orchestra has been described as being among the top ten orchestras on earth.

Made up of the cream of Australian orchestral instrumentalists drawn annually from around the world, the AWO in its short history has already attracted conductors of the ilk of Sir Simon Rattle, Zubin Mehta and Riccardo Muti.

This 10th Anniversary concert was conducted by the co-founder and Artistic Director of the AWO, Alexander Briger AO, and featured a smaller number of musicians than in previous iterations as the result of Covid travel restrictions.

However it still featured Australian musicians from The London Symphony, USA National Symphony, Munich Philharmonic, Oslo Philharmonic, Auckland Philharmonic, Malaysian Philharmonic, and Leipzig's Gewandhaus Orchestra as well as from every major Australian symphony orchestra and conservatorium.

Briger has created an orchestral Rolls Royce, obvious from the very first notes of Beethoven's *Coriolan – Overture, Op.62* which opened the program. Three unhurried strident open octaves, perfectly executed and demanding attention heralded a scintillating performance, finely delineated, meticulously phrased with every musician perfectly focussed and the conductor in full control of every nuance. It provided an auspicious opening for a brilliant concert.

The centrepiece of the 2021 program was the specially commissioned symphony from Brisbane composer, Paul Dean, entitled simply *Symphony (2021)*. In his program notes, Briger claims this symphony as the only full symphony to have been commissioned by an Australian orchestra in recent times, and it's a beauty.

Confident, challenging, inspired by his love of nature and his concerns of the effects of global warming, Dean has created a spine-tingling work which begins very quietly, with clarinets and flutes positioned around the auditorium creating an enchanting surround-sound evocation of bird calls and forest sounds.

An underlying rhythmic pulse gradually becomes more urgent eventually culminating in a crescendo of discordant sound. Exciting and unnerving at the same time. Again the intense concentration and skill of each musician, confidently guided by Briger through the intricacies and kaleidoscopic orchestral colourisations, was as fascinating to watch as it was to listen to.

The toll being obvious each time Briger paused to wipe the perspiration from his brow between movements. Each movement culminated in an almost frightening primeval screaming, as if expressing frustration at the apparent impossibility of preventing the inevitable.

As the final notes of *Symphony (2021)* faded away, the small but appreciative audience, aware it had been privy to an extraordinary first performance of a new masterwork, erupted into sustained applause as Briger beckoned the composer to the stage to share the accolades with his orchestra.

The complexities and fireworks of *Symphony (2021)* behind them, Schumann's mighty *Symphony No 2 in C, Op.61* provided the perfect book-end for this memorable concert. It was almost possible to detect an audible sigh from the orchestra as it returned to familiar territory. Briger too looked much more relaxed, though no less in control as he savoured the performance of his orchestral Rolls Royce.

During the lovely Adagio espressivo passage he occasionally took his hands off the controls to allow the orchestra to cruise along with only the most minimal of gestures to guide them while he savoured the hum of his impeccably tuned creation before revving it up again for its commanding finale.

It was a shame that a Covid-19 outbreak robbed Melbourne audiences of experiencing what must surely be one of the finest orchestral concerts of the year.

Llewellyn Hall – The Australian National University, William Herbert Place, Acton (Canberra)

Performance: Wednesday 2 June 2021

Information: www.australianworldorchestra.com.au

Image: Australian World Orchestra – photo by Peter Hislop

Review: Bill Stephens OAM.