

Australian World Orchestra ★★★★★

The Australian World Orchestra again proves its mettle as an orchestra that Sir Simon Rattle said is “not just a national treasure, it’s an international treasure”.

Llewellyn Hall, Canberra

Reviewed on 2 June, 2021

by [Clinton White](#) on 3 June, 2021

When an orchestra of the standing and excellence of the Australian World Orchestra comes to town it is both surprising and disappointing if the town does not turn out a full house to welcome them.

Around 500 made the 1,500-seat Llewellyn Hall look a bit sparsely populated for a concert with a big WOW factor. Still, a feast of other fine concerts was on offer in Canberra over the next week or so, including the premiere of Christopher Latham’s epic *Vietnam Requiem* on the weekend, so perhaps the practicalities of calendars or wallets (or both) overruled attendance desires.



Alexander Briger conducting the Australian World Orchestra in Sydney, 2021. Photograph © Ken Leanfore

Celebrating its 10th anniversary, the AWO, under the baton of its Music and Artistic Director, Alexander Briger, opened the program with a nod to another birthday – postponed as it was from last year by a pandemic – Beethoven’s 250th. His *Coriolan* Overture was well chosen in the program, for its drama and intensity was a taste of what was to come.

Conducting from memory, Briger took the tempo perhaps just a tiny bit slow, but the players, led by Concertmaster for the first half of the concert, Katherine Lukey, Deputy Concertmaster of the Opera Australia Orchestra, kept the momentum going superbly with no loss of energy. Briger’s impeccably detailed conducting style kept things under tight control, achieving beautiful orchestral balance, even through the many dynamic changes, but especially the smooth-as-silk *crescendi* and *diminuendi*.

With a few more musicians added to the forces, it then was the world premiere of Paul Dean’s *Symphony*, which [the orchestra had commissioned](#) for its anniversary.

The four-movement work is not what might be called tuneful, but the harmonic structure is complex, and the piece is as powerful as it is rich, as intense as it is suspenseful, as thought-provoking as it is exhausting.

In an interview with Christopher Lawrence (first published in the May 2021 issue of *Limelight*), included in the lavish souvenir program booklet, Dean says about his work, “I’m driven by this overwhelming march towards midnight. What are we – 50 seconds or 40 or whatever that number is; arbitrary, but also entirely alarming?”

For all that, though, the work cannot be described as programmatic; its intensity – its alarmism – from beginning to end is unrelenting, regardless of tempi or dynamics, and as overwhelming as Dean says about our global environmental challenges.

That said, the front end of *Symphony* leads the listener into a false sense of the idyllic. Starting with the faintest hint of a whisper, the music suggests the dawn of a new day, punctuated by the most superbly authentic of bird calls – especially magpies – from flutes and clarinets scattered through the audience.



Paul Dean, Alexander Briger and the Australian World Orchestra, City Recital Hall, Sydney, 2021. Photo © Ken Leanfore

But it is not long before that relentless intensity takes over, with a predominance of triple time and sometimes duple time, as well as more complex rhythms, punctuated by angry, short, sharp stripes of bow on string, blasts from brass or thunder on the large bass drum or tympani.

A special shout-out to the two percussionists, timpanist Antoine Bedewi (BBC Symphony Orchestra Principal) and percussionist, David Montgomery (Queensland Symphony Orchestra Principal). They had major and quite complex roles and delivered on them brilliantly. Timing perfection was required often and mostly achieved, even though they were either side of the orchestra. They added much drama to the intensity of *Symphony*.

The work is marked by much brooding and darkness, especially in the foreboding second movement, which starts slow and quiet, but with no less intensity than the rest of the piece. As it builds to a huge resolve and then dies away to nothing but a quietly rolling tympani and fading flute, there are wonderfully expansive string sounds, giving way to impossibly quiet woodwinds and brass with bold percussion exclamation marks.

The third and fourth movements return to the freneticism of the first, with a lot going on throughout the orchestra. Divisions get their own passages, and mix it with others, while throughout there is anger and filmic suspense. I thought at one point the work would die away in a sunset much like the dawn at the opening, but it ended with a sit-up-and-take-notice roar.

Symphony would be a challenge for any orchestra, but the AWO's performance was one that delivered a monumental work with assured precision, extraordinary emotion and explosive power. It is a work that succeeds brilliantly, not only for its music and passion, but also for its message.

After interval, QSO concertmaster, Warwick Adeney, took over the concertmaster's chair, and Briger conducted, again from memory, Schumann's four-movement Symphony No 2 in C, Op. 61.

With glimpses of Beethoven and Mendelssohn, the work, written in 1845, "demands to be ... heard," says David Garrett in the program notes, "for its sub-text, from despair, through healing, to redemption." Schumann was struggling with mental health at the time.

However one wants to hear it, the AWO's performance, under Briger's nuanced and detailed conducting and interpretation, was thoughtful and engaging. The second movement *Scherzo* perhaps was a tad quick, with the orchestra occasionally losing clarity, but not sparkle, but it did not detract at all from the overall enjoyment of this quite dramatic piece.

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Sir Simon Rattle, "not just a national treasure, it's an international treasure".

The Australian World Orchestra performs at City Recital Hall, Sydney on 3 June at 7.30pm. With the forced cancellation of the Melbourne concert on 4 June due to the COVID lockdown, the Sydney concert will be streamed live