



27 NOV, 2023

In light and darkness, Mahler brought vividly to life

Sydney Morning Herald, Sydney

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MUSIC

MAHLER 9



Australian World Orchestra
Opera House Concert Hall,
November 25

Reviewed by **PETER MCCALLUM**

The Australian World Orchestra is a gathering, annually if funds allow, of the diaspora of Australian musicians across the globe.

Like the Australian Youth Orchestra, it is defined more by its organisational structure than continuity of personnel. It was a pleasure to welcome and hear Natalie Chee as concertmaster and listen to the distinctive sounds of other familiar players now working overseas.

This year's concert under conductor and AWO founder Alexander Briger was devoted to a single work, Mahler's ninth, and arguably greatest, symphony, which the composer himself never heard. It is a work of farewell both symbolically and literally. In quoting Beethoven's *Lebewohl* Sonata, opus 81a, it draws to a hushed close both Mahler's cycle of completed symphonic works and the whole Romantic tradition.

Yet it also looks forward as a foundational cornerstone of the modernist era. Almost as rewarding as hearing the AWO bring it vividly to life, was to hear the wild enthusiasm of the young musicians of AWO's education program for this 90-minute work which, in contemplating death, also affirms life even in its moments of piercing irony.

Like life, Mahler's beginning is fragmentary and tentative, starting with a theme of ill-defined rhythm on a single note. The balance was a little disjointed though not inappropriately so. Mahler's orchestration throughout is spare

and stark, deliberately placing his ideas in awkward juxtaposition to create alienation.

The second movement starts with a bright idea on bassoon, comic, impertinent and over-confident. Briger and the AWO brought out its raucous spirit with keen focus and stirring restlessness before giving the final bars, a pairing of piccolo and contra-bassoon, a wink of sardonic elegance. If the second

movement hovers on the edge of irony, the third, with angular accents, bizarre orchestrations and complex thematic juxtapositions appears openly and at times caustically sarcastic.

Mahler pauses this clamour to hint at the finale theme in a moment where the AWO created mellow warmth. In the last movement, a long fade into remarkable stillness, the AWO strings created wonderfully rich sound of energised intensity, to which the woodwind responded with clear textures like shafts of soft light.

The solos of lead horn player Lin Jiang were of velvety density. Mahler's close is a withdrawal of the ego and it was a miscalculation to fade the hall to darkness with a single spotlight on the conductor for an overlong silence. The end, when it comes, can't be stage-managed.



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The AWO's young musicians, under founder and conductor Alexander Briger, showed wild enthusiasm. Photo: Helga Salwe