

Elite musicians produce dazzling performance

MUSIC

Mahlerfest | Mahler 4 and 5



Australian World Orchestra,

Hamer Hall, September 3

Reviewed by **Tony Way**

Gathering some of the finest Australian players from around the globe, this year the Australian World Orchestra shed a probing light on Mahler's dark obsession with death and lost innocence, explored in his fourth and fifth symphonies.

Directed by its founder Alexander Briger, the AWO brought appealing lustre and engaging clarity to its playing throughout. Attention to details of balance, dynamics and articulation was well projected in a hall where these elements can sometimes be submerged.

Briger led a tightly controlled account of Symphony No. 4, a journey driven by a yearning to return to the joys of childhood. Although beginning with the



The Australian World Orchestra performs Mahlerfest. Photo: Heidi Victoria

carefree sound of sleigh bells, the work soon sounds ominous signals, leading to a ghoully second-movement scherzo to which co-concertmaster Rebecca Chan contributed a well-characterised solo.

At the climax of the achingly beautiful third movement, soprano Sarah Traubel appeared, an angelic vision with her shining blonde hair and dressed in a sparkling light blue gown. This closing vocal movement was a

setting of *The Heavenly Life*, a lyric from the folk song collection *The Youth's Magic Horn*. Her voice, like that of a child, filled – but didn't overflow – the hall, bringing the music to a whispered conclusion.

Such quiet was a perfect foil to the opening of the Fifth with its agitated trumpet fanfare commanding announced by Lukas Beno.

Briger, once again conducting from memory, whipped up nervous energy in the opening funeral march and into the maelstrom of the second movement.

Andrew Bain's fearless horn playing crowned the consistently colourful playing in the central scherzo. Plush string tone made the celebrated *adagietto* a heartfelt reverie, before the orchestra, enthusiastically led by co-concertmaster Daniel Dodds, embarked on the triumphant finale.

What a joy to hear Australia's elite musicians engage with such demanding but rewarding music.