

Expert storytelling in masterclass by nation's finest

MUSIC

Stravinsky, Mills and

Shostakovich ★★★★★

Australian World Orchestra, Hamer Hall, August 19

Reviewed by **Tony Way**

Now celebrating its 50th anniversary, the annual ritual of bringing together Australia's finest orchestral musicians under the banner of the Australian World Orchestra has rightly become an eagerly anticipated fixture in the nation's musical calendar.

Expert musical storytelling characterised this year's program, one in which a curious set of Australian fables was bookended by two Russian classics.

Really a concerto for orchestra, Stravinsky's ballet *Petrushka* (presented in the revised 1947 version) allowed many of the AWO's

talented players to bask briefly in the limelight as the story of the puppet *Petrushka*'s being brought to life unfolded.

Conductor Alexander Briger imparted an appropriately light touch to Stravinsky's droll, whimsical mixture of vigorous folk music and mock tragedy, eliciting laser-like rhythmic accuracy from his forces.

Commissioned by the AWO for this tour, Jonathan Mills' *Songs for the Stranger* draws on and adds to material from his opera *Eucalyptus*, based on Murray Bail's novel and cast in poetic form by Meredith Oakes.

Tenor Michael Petrucci, who starred in the opera, brought punctilious diction and highly committed musical communication to this set of five quirky tales, scored predominantly by Mills in a muted,

shadowy world of low strings, often haloed by reverberant percussion.

Crackling with collaborative electricity, Shostakovich's Symphony No. 10 became a powerhouse of musical dynamism from the vast expanses of the opening to the jet-propelled Allegro, and thence to the impassioned delirium of the third movement in which the composer arguably confesses his infatuation with a student. In a work possibly driven by the then recent death of Stalin, the finale was equally unabashed, although punctuated with some superlative wind solos.

Despite last-minute personnel changes, the AWO, both individually and collectively, brought world-class musicianship to a generous and demanding program. It is surely a musical outfit of which we can all be proud.



Conductor Alexander Briger in full flight. Photo: Carmen Zammit