



**Australian**  
**Tuesday 30/08/2011**

Page: 14  
 Section: Arts & Entertainment  
 Region: Australia, AU  
 Circulation: 128985  
 Type: National  
 Size: 687.59 sq.cms.



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# An orchestra without the cringe

A fly-in fly-out group of Australian musicians is making sweet music

MATTHEW WESTWOOD



THE Australian World Orchestra, which gave its debut concerts in Sydney at the weekend, was dreamed up by conductor Alexander Briger as a showcase for Australian musicians working here and abroad. It's a kind of premier league for orchestral musicians.

Stanley Dodds from the Berlin Philharmonic was the concertmaster; opposite him as principal viola was composer Brett Dean, also formerly of Berlin. And no disrespect is intended when I say it was amusing to see players of such

calibre as Sophie Rowell (Australian String Quartet) and Christopher Moore (Australian Chamber Orchestra) sitting in the back desks. It was clear the AWO had fielded a highly talented team.

But when I went to the first concert at the Sydney Opera House on Friday evening, it was more out of curiosity than anticipation of being blown away. The hall was only 70 per cent full. And I had a nagging suspicion the AWO would be a jingoistic exercise, a faintly embarrassing need to show that our musicians are world-class. I started to dream up T-shirt slogans: "Aussie violinists fiddle with the best!" I prayed that the band wouldn't launch into *Waltzing Matilda* or *I Still Call Australia Home*.

There was a strong mood of national pride on Friday evening but it wasn't brash. And the music — Wagner, Sculthorpe and Tchaikovsky conducted by Simone Young — was sensational.

Who would have thought that these fly-in, fly-out musicians could produce such a burnished sound and such thrilling projection. The playing may have lacked the final finesse you would expect

of a full-time orchestra, but I was dazzled by the quicksilver exchanges and the distinctive tone-colours brought to each piece.

So the nay-sayers were proved wrong. But the AWO, apart from its exciting music-making, has been a timely reality check, an assessment of Australian orchestral music and where we're going.

Some of the musicians who returned to play in the AWO have never had professional careers in this country. Piccolo player Linda Stuckey was raised in Sydney, studied at the Canberra School of Music and won a scholarship to the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester, England. She won a position in the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra, moved there 14 years ago, married and had three children.

Stuckey says she never planned on living the expat life, but her choices here were few: there are simply not enough jobs in Australia for all the musicians we produce.

Musicians have left our shores in great numbers since the trail was blazed by the likes of concert pianist Percy Grainger and sop-



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rano Nellie Melba, our first international superstar. The touring circuit for classical music winds between the concert halls and opera houses of the northern hemisphere, and ambitious musicians tend to go where the action is. And classical music's heartland in middle Europe exerts a strong pull.

The Western tradition of concert music derives mostly from Austria and Germany of the 18th and 19th centuries. Musicians long to hear the native orchestras, to visit the churches and concert halls where the music was born, and to immerse themselves in the culture that produced it. Dean, for one, considers the European experience essential.

But in talking to several expat musicians in recent weeks, I heard no hint of cultural cringe — the flight from real or imagined philistinism — that tarnished the experience of earlier generations of artists. More likely, our musicians are now sharing their home-grown knowledge and artistry with the wider world.

You'll find them in concert halls and training academies, and not only in orchestral music. For ex-

ample: Sydney viola player Simon Murphy, who founded the New Dutch Academy in The Hague in 2002, has helped bring back into performance forgotten music from the 18th-century Dutch court.

In the field of composition, Dean is to be honoured with a 10-day festival of his music in Stockholm, including a new piece commemorating the 2009 Victorian bushfires. And there are young adventurers such as Brisbane-born flute player Tim Munro, whose contemporary group Eighth Blackbird, based in the US, is soon to tour Australian cities.

The musical landscape has changed at home, too. The problem of oversupply (Australia produces far more accomplished musicians than we can employ) is a common one around the world. Music is a highly competitive profession. But at least our music academies are preparing graduates to be global musicians and to embark on their careers with a spirit of entrepreneurship rather than entitlement.

The symphony orchestras are

being revitalised after their sometimes rocky separation from ABC central control. A stultifying jobs-for-life culture has given way to more flexible workplaces. There's not a high turnover of positions, but nor are the orchestras closed to newcomers. The state orchestras in Sydney, Melbourne and Perth average five vacancies a year, with applications coming from abroad as well as from local players.

The traffic between Australia and the rest of the musical world, once one-directional, now goes both ways, as the AWO project demonstrates.

After its debut on Friday night, demand for tickets grew and the AWO looks likely to break even on its \$1 million investment. Briger, in a jubilant mood after the Friday concert, told me he intends to repeat the exercise in 2013, ideally with a Melbourne season as well as Sydney.

With a more dynamic set of local orchestras, and regular visits from international orchestras — the Vienna Philharmonic makes a return visit next month — Australia's concert life has not sounded better.



ALAN PRYKE

**Conductor Simone Young**



**Alexander Briger dreamed up the concept for the orchestra**

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