

THE SECOND COMING...

After their stunning 2011 debut, the Australian World Orchestra are back! And they're bringing a very special guest, learns **Kim Trill**

If someone had harnessed the electricity in the air at the Australian World Orchestra's debut performance in August 2011, it could have powered the whole Sydney Opera House for months to come.

"Before the orchestra had even played a single note," recalls AWO founder and artistic director, conductor Alexander Briger, "the audience gave them a three-minute standing ovation. It was unreal."

For ex-Melbourne violinist Anne Harvey-Nagl – concertmaster of the Vienna Volksoper and Austrian resident of over two decades, it was "one of her most musically electrifying experiences ever... The end product was a sound I have never experienced before. There were a lot of goosebumps involved."

Like Harvey-Nagl, almost all the 92 musicians on the stage of the Sydney Opera House had flown in from somewhere else – many from positions as concertmasters and principals of 45 European, American and Asian orchestras. They'd come from the Berlin and Vienna Philharmonics, from Stuttgart, London, Copenhagen and Edinburgh, Vancouver, New York, Los Angeles, Hong Kong... to sit alongside players representing every Australian state orchestra – and even members of the current Australian Youth Orchestra. Before them, baton poised to launch into a program of Wagner, Sculthorpe and Tchaikovsky, stood Simone Young – the Sydney-born conductor who became high priestess of the Hamburg State Opera and Hamburg Philharmonic.

United by their phenomenal collective musical talent (and their Australian passports) the AWO was an

international first – the world's only orchestra comprised solely of representatives of one country, brought together from all over the planet. For many of the expat musicians, it was the realisation of an impossible dream – to play again on Australian soil and rekindle friendships from a former life.

"It's like AYO with wrinkles," commented Young on surveying the musicians assembled before her at the first rehearsal.

Artistically and musically, the venture was a triumph. Featuring works and appearances by Australian composers Peter Sculthorpe and Brett Dean, a solo by didgeridoo virtuoso William Barton – the concerts were acclaimed by critics and was even voted Best Orchestral Concert of 2011, by none other than *Limelight* magazine.

"It's an experience I'll never forget," said Matthew McDonald, principal double bass of the Berlin Philharmonic. "The standard of playing was of a luxuriously high level, made all the more exciting with each musician bringing a wealth of ensemble experience with them. I think it worked musically so well because of the wonderful personal energy running through the AWO. I don't think many of us had experienced an orchestral project so socially fun since playing in youth orchestras."

That was then, this is now. The AWO's second series of concerts take place this month, with Melbourne also being granted performances in Hamer Hall on October 2 and 4, with a 40th anniversary of the Sydney Opera House wedged in between on October 3. After such



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a rapturously received debut, this year's concerts risk suffering from "the curse of the second album". Can the success of 2011 be repeated? What augurs well for the orchestra is their conductor for 2013: in a major coup, Zubin Mehta is heading south to direct the 105-piece ensemble for all three concerts.

The 77-year-old former musical director of the Los Angeles and New York Philharmonics appears unfazed by the prospect of an amalgam of musicians who normally work in vastly different orchestral traditions. "They are such fine musicians," says Mehta, "even if they haven't all grown up with each other, they know the repertoire they are playing inside out and they'll have such fun playing with each other and being in each other's company."

Approximately one tenth of the AWO is based in

Vienna, where Mehta himself studied in the 1950s, and still regularly conducts the Vienna Philharmonic. But it was a Japanese orchestra, oddly enough, that provided the inspiration for the AWO. In 2005, Briger was invited to conduct the Japanese Virtuoso Symphony Orchestra, made up of top musicians selected from Tokyo's finest orchestras. The spectacular results of the JVSO model

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MATTHEW McDONALD - PRINCIPAL DOUBLE BASS
BERLIN PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA

When Canberrian Matthew McDonald first encountered a double bass at the age of 15, he "fell in love there and then," practicing "obsessively" right from the start. Under the mentorship of Max McBride at the Canberra School of Music, he was soon playing with the AYO and "becoming addicted to the thrill of performing". By 19 he was at the Sydney Conservatorium, playing with the Sydney Symphony and dreaming of Berlin. By 22 he was studying at the prestigious Karajan Academy at the invitation of Wolfram Christ, Principal Viola of the Berlin Philharmonic. Within a week he was playing with the Berlin Phil, and "terrified".

It would be eight years – playing in Copenhagen, Ensemble Moderne in Frankfurt and the Rundfunk Sinfonie Berlin – before he finally won his dream job: principal double Bass of the Berlin Philharmonic, a position he's held since 2008. For Matthew, the AWO has given him "a chance for me to start a relationship with Australia again. To actually work in Australia, for something so special, really started a new thing for me. To be there having these typical expat conversations but on home soil was almost like group therapy!"

so impressed Briger that he began to fantasize about creating an Australian version of the idea, with the added challenge that musicians would have to be repatriated from across the globe.

Briger tells of sharing his idea with his uncle, the renowned conductor Sir Charles Mackerras, over a bottle of red, three years after his Japan experience. Mackerras, Briger's mentor and "second father", was overwhelmingly enthusiastic. The next day, Briger called his close friend, oboist Nick Deutsch, now Professor of Oboe at the Hochschule für Musik in Leipzig, Germany.

"Alex said he'd just had an amazing conversation with his uncle," Deutsch recalls. "Of course I thought it was a brilliant idea, something we'd all been dreaming of for years – a chance to come home and play together with other Australians. I'd been working in Europe for 16 years, performing with over 40 orchestras and being consistently amazed at how many Australian musicians are working here. Alex and I began to ask people what they thought, and everyone loved the idea."

Enthusiastic as they may have been, few in the expat musician community imagined Briger could actually pull it off, even with the support of Sir Charles, who had come on board as the orchestra's patron. Vienna Symphony's Principal Horn, Hector McDonald, was more than skeptical.

"The AWO project seemed completely crazy to me. Getting all those musicians from overseas at the same time... the sheer expense of it, the logistics! And getting top line conductors at the same time, plus getting the local orchestras to let players be involved... a nightmare! The fact that it's actually happened is extraordinary."

Securing an A-list conductor such as Mehta proved easier than expected: an army of musicians in orchestras around the world was a networking resource. Nick Deutsch proved the key contact, having worked under Zubin for seven years in the Israel Philharmonic, directed by Mehta since 1967. Appealing to his well-known passion for cricket, Deutsch initially enticed the Indian maestro Australia-wards with the promise of combining the AWO concerts with one of the Ashes Tests

between England and Australia in December.

"Unfortunately," laments Mehta, "I couldn't make it in December and we shifted it to September. So I won't see any cricket this time I'm afraid."

But he's looking forward to his antipodean sojourn regardless. "I know quite a few of the musicians who are coming to play from abroad. So many great Australian musicians will come from Vienna, Berlin, Munich – many other places. It's a very tempting prospect."

Briger couldn't be more excited. "It's a total coup. Mehta is quite simply one of my favourite conductors. He's like a classical music version of Mick Jagger or Paul McCartney. You can't help but be in awe of these people when they are in front of you. And given that Mehta usually sticks to many of the same orchestras many of these musicians have never met or worked under him before. And the ones who have know just what he will bring! We know from the inaugural season the orchestra is on the edge of their seats the entire time, but having someone of this stature in front of them will tip it over the edge. It's a little like a big wave surfer surfing a 40-foot wave at Waimea Bay and then going up the road and jumping on a 70-foot wave at Peahi! You have to give that bit more!"

For Matt McDonald, the diversity within the orchestra only adds to the thrill, showing, "how great an orchestra can sound with a mix of styles and traditions. While we have a common nationality, our musical backgrounds

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MEET
THE AWO
PLAYERS

ANNE HARVEY-NAGL ~ CONCERTMISTRESS
VIENNA VOLKSOPER ORCHESTRA

From the moment she heard a violin at the age of seven, Anne Harvey wanted to lead her own orchestra. Anne first visited Vienna on the AYO's 1988 European tour, moving there three years later to study with the Alban Berg Quartet's Gunter Pichler. She was soon performing with the Vienna Chamber Orchestra, the Radio Symphony Orchestra, the Vienna Chamber Philharmonic, the Haydn-Academy Ensemble and Klangforum Wien.

In 1999, Anne was appointed Principal First Violin of the Vienna Volksoper, winning the coveted position of Concertmistress in 2011. Anne is regular concertmistress and soloist with the Vienna Mozart Orchestra, the Vienna Opera Ball Orchestra and Philharmonia Wien. She's also been a member of the acclaimed Koehne string quartet for 20 years. "Convincing the conservative Viennese that an Australian woman could lead the orchestra of an opera house specializing in Viennese music was really hard. Some colleagues in the orchestra were skeptical at first, but I think now they accept my approach and style of playing."



Briger conducts
the AWO in 2011

MEET
THE AWO
PLAYERS



HECTOR MCDONALD ~ PRINCIPAL FRENCH HORN
VIENNA SYMPHONY/CONCENTUS MUSICUS

Toowomba-born Hector McDonald's love of all things brass began at the age of nine. From tenor horn in the Blue Mountains Brass Band he switched to french horn in the Air Force Band, before winning a job with the Elizabethan Trust Orchestra.

At 22, Hector was invited to study in Berlin, and a year later had a job with the Berlin Philharmonic. For the past 25 years he's held the position of Principal Horn with both the Vienna Symphony and period instrument group Concentus Musicus, Wien, directed by Nikolaus Harnoncourt.



couldn't have been more varied. I loved the excitement generated by this, as it's rare to play in an orchestra mixing so many styles of playing. The differences are subtle, but can make a big difference in a full time orchestra with its own traditions. The AWO was wonderfully unfettered by these issues."

Briger leapt at Mehta's suggestion to perform the score to Igor Stravinsky's once riot-provoking ballet, *The Rite of Spring*, which commemorates the centenary of its composition this year.

"Mehta is renowned worldwide for his interpretation of this work. As a conductor myself, I personally think he is the best conductor of this work alive. I've seen him and many others do it live but nothing compares to the excitement produced from both the orchestra and audience that Mehta brings to this work. Mehta is also one of the great interpreters of Gustav Mahler. So we asked him which symphony he would like to do and he chose the First, which is perfect for this orchestra."

This particular combination of works will be a first for Mehta. "These two works were written within a little more than a decade by two great revolutionaries and are completely different in style. It will be wonderful to change gears before and after the intermission. I don't want it to sound too difficult."

Even with one successful season behind them and now Mehta as drawcard, the financial and logistical challenges of putting together what Alex describes as "one of the most complicated orchestras in Australia's history" remain daunting. The brainpower at the helm of the mammoth undertaking is Briger's sister, the dynamic Gabrielle Thompson – film producer and now CEO of AWO.

"We've moved away from thinking of ourselves as just a festival organisation to an arts organisation," Gabrielle explains, noting that she, Alex and most of the staff are working on a *pro bono* basis. "We

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fund ourselves as do other arts organizations, by seeking support from four major areas: government – both federal and state; ticket sales, which account for about half our income; corporate support, which is tough in the current environment, and the philanthropic market in both Sydney and Melbourne. We've been thrilled at the way the market segment has embraced us." Pulling together the "World Domination Orchestra", as its been nicknamed, has almost taken over the Brigers' lives.

However, the enthusiastic reception on the part of the musicians has created somewhat of a dilemma for Briger as artistic director. "There are so many wonderful



The AWO class of 2011 at the Sydney Opera House

Australian musicians worldwide, yet we can invite only around 100 of them each season, for obvious reasons. We wish we could have them all, but that would mean an orchestra of over 1,000!”

Horn player Hector McDonald is “delighted and honoured” to be invited to participate a second time. For him this season holds a particular significance. On October 3, 1963, at the tender age of 20, he played with the Elizabethan Trust Orchestra under the baton of Sir Charles Mackerras, as Queen Elizabeth II opened the Sydney Opera House. Forty years later, he’ll be back on the same stage, “very excited” at the prospect of celebrating this landmark event “with such a distinguished group of musicians as the Australian World Orchestra”.

In contrast with most orchestras, there are no auditions for the AWO, and players decide which parts they should play, so the audience will see the orchestra rotating in their seating during the performance. “Many musicians have written to us asking to play and we have tried where possible to include them,” explains Briger. “If it hasn’t been possible thus far, they are on the list for the future. This year’s line-up is different from 2011, but those who have not been re-invited or are unable to attend know they are still part of the ‘family’”.

For now, Briger can’t wait for the first rehearsal when the orchestra is “all together again, tuning and nervously waiting, then out walks Zubin Mehta! And then, the performances, when the orchestra is on stage, the door opens and out walks this great man! The music, I know, will be sensational.” ●

The Australian World Orchestra play Sydney and Melbourne, October 2-4. Tickets are available from www.australianworldorchestra.com.au



NICK DEUTSCH - PROFESSOR OF OBOE
HOCHSCHULE FOR MUSIK, LEIPZIG

Born in Israel to a clarinetist mother, Nick moved to Sydney with his family when he was three. By 14, he knew he wanted to be either a conductor or musician, but it wasn’t until he was 19 that he finally settled on the oboe. After graduating from the VCA, Nick left Australia to study in Germany. He “had no intention to stay in Europe”, but after winning an orchestral job in Spain – where he met his future wife, a French violinist – he eventually settled in Germany.

Deutsch has played all over Europe – with the Chamber Orchestra of Europe, the Munich Philharmonic and Deutsche Sinfonie Orchestra, among others – and performed as a soloist with the Camerata Salzburg, the Bach Kollegium in Stuttgart, and Munich Chamber Orchestra. Currently he’s Professor of Oboe at the Hochschule für Musik in Leipzig. “I do feel that in many ways I have achieved my initial goals... but there’s always room for new dreams. If you’re always trying to reach for perfection, then those goals just become further away.”