



Dandenong Ranges Orchestra

Musical Director's Report - 2016

By Robert Dora

Chief Conductor/Musical Director: May - December 2016

- Previous long-time Chief Conductor/Musical Director John Collins conducted the orchestra until May 2016

2016 was a highly dynamic and productive year for the Dandenong Ranges Orchestra (DRO) with the ensemble giving four major (and two smaller) public performances in it. While being a year in which some notable changes occurred, the ensemble gave entertaining performances of fine music throughout the year with constant enthusiasm and commitment.

The ensemble is currently comprised of over 30 'core' instrumentalists who regularly attend rehearsals on Monday nights in Upwey (Victoria). In 2016 they were regularly joined by various guest instrumentalists as well as guest soloists. There were several instrumental member changes in the orchestra in 2016 which included the gaining of multiple new 'core' members towards the year's end.

It's very recent (and approaching) repertoire ranges from operetta and 'choral' highlights to film medleys, music theatre arrangements, contemporary Australian compositions as well as orchestral suites, overtures and other music by great Western classical orchestral composers such as Mozart, Vivaldi, Wagner, Bizet, Sibelius and Holst. Included in the orchestra's 'musical offerings' for 2016 were multiple performances of relatively 'unheralded' works by Late 19th – Early 20th Century composers, such as Anatoly Liadov and Robert Stolz, that are relatively unperformed in 21st Century Australia but which are each musically 'rich'. The orchestra's instrumentalists and its audiences seemed to really appreciate these composers through the orchestra's performances of several of their works. Through repertoire

selections such as these, and the semi-regular inclusion of works by Australian composers, the DRO has musically contributed to the community's 'social fabric' in ways which few other Victorian ensembles do on a regular basis.

March Concert Season – *Autumn Concert*

The orchestra's previous and long-time Musical Director of 16 years, John Collins, conducted the ensemble until May 2016 before handing over the role to me (which I undertook from late May to early December of 2016). John's last performance with the DRO was the 2016 ***Autumn Concert*** on Sunday 20th March. It featured the Premiere of a work by local Australian composer Jacqui Rutten as well as works by orchestral music icons Beethoven, Sibelius and Respighi.

Talented soloists Veronica Mitchell (soprano) and Huhana Rae (harp) returned to give fine musical performances in this picturesque concert in the Performing Arts Centre of Monbulk Primary School. The performance delighted its audience and is fondly remembered by members of the orchestra.

June Concert Season – *Trances & Dances*

Being the first performance of my tenure with the DRO, the June 19 concert entitled ***Trances & Dances*** canvassed a variety of musical styles and forms, from orchestral suites, 19th century operettas to Baroque period music. Well received by the near capacity audience in the Gem Theatre (Emerald), the overture from Gilbert & Sullivan's 'timeless classic' of an operetta, *The Pirates of Penzance*, opened the program with a lot of enthusiasm on the orchestra's behalf and featured brief instrumental solos from within the orchestra. The orchestra's own, and musically multi-talented, Bill Vrijens well performed the solo of Antonio Vivaldi's 'bright' *Mandolin Concerto in C* along with DRO's string section who beautifully performed the concerto's second movement

with general confidence despite some nerves being evident in the fast movements. The full orchestra then gave a performance of Ketelby's *In A Persian Market*, concluding the opening half on a very fun and relaxed note.

After performing Respighi's 'Danza Rustica' (from the *Ancient Airs and Dances Suite No. 2*) quite well the orchestra emotionally blossomed for Borodin's beautiful *In The Steppes of Central Asia*. The concert was concluded by a 'boisterous' yet convincing rendition of the complete *L'Arlésienne Suite No. 1* by George Bizet.

September Concert Season – *Luscious Landscapes*

The DRO's ***Luscious Landscapes*** concert saw multiple 'firsts' for the orchestra, including the very accurate and moving performances of two fairly unheralded compositions by two 'period' composers whose works the orchestra had not previously performed (Robert Stolz's fun and triumphant *UNO Marsch* and Anatoly Liadov *Enchanted Lake*). The concert's opening half also included Jean Sibelius' ebullient *Andante Festivo* and Gustav Holst's tranquil to jovial *Brook Green Suite*, both being well performed by the orchestra, inclusive of suitable dynamic variations and generally good ensemble 'togetherness'.

This concert's third 'first' for the orchestra came in the form of the challenging *Symphony No. 104 ("London")* by Joseph Haydn, the DRO's first performance of a complete symphony. This work in particular saw the orchestra obviously develop performance and rehearsal wise, clearly evident in this concert's (including this piece's) universally more musically rounded, confident and 'tighter' performance in comparison with the previous concert. Being a very challenging work the DRO's rehearsing (and resulting performance) of this symphony certainly 'pushed' and extended the orchestra's capacities (both musically, technically and stamina wise). It was a challenge that could have quite easily been too daunting for the orchestra as a whole however with much hard work (which included tutorial rehearsing from DRO Assistant

Conductor Henry Rutgers and DRO concertmaster Rebecca Cottman), perseverance and ensemble wide 'trust' the whole orchestra succeeded in continually improving it's playing of every aspect of the work. This improvement was constant from this works first to last rehearsal with it clearly getting even better still in performance, (very 'fruitful' considering how this work had initially clearly 'pushed' the ensemble's limits not two month's prior).

Despite the occasional 'rough edge' tonally the orchestra's performance of the symphony was confident, highly dynamic and quite nuanced. This concert was a significant 'step' for the orchestra.

October Performances – *Close Musical Encounters*

October saw the occurrence of two 'chamber styled' performances, which provided members of the orchestra the opportunity to perform essentially the same program for both performances and in areas far from the orchestra's usual performing area, being the Dandenong Ranges. The first was in the Deakin Edge auditorium (Federation Square) on October 3rd at 12noon as part of 'The Victorian Seniors Festival', the second was in Richmond Uniting Church.

As well as briefly revisiting works from earlier in the year both October performances included two new works for small orchestra: The challenging set of seven *Romanian Dances* by Béla Bartók, and, an orchestration (for violin solo and small orchestra) of the theme from the film *Schindler's List* with memorable music by John Williams. Both works were conducted by Henry Rutgers with the violin solo played at Deakin Edge by Robert Dora and at Richmond Uniting Church by Reuben Vrijens. Both of these works held different new challenges for the orchestra and on both occurrences each work received emotional performances.

In the Richmond Uniting Church performance a flute choir (comprised of various of the orchestra's instrumentalists) gave a nice rendition of James

Hook's *Andantino* from *Trio in G*. All the repeated works in these concerts were well performed and each slightly 'tightened' musically from each work's previous performance.

October Performances – *Swingin' Summer*

DRO's year ended in bright and breezy fashion with its December 4 concert entitled ***Swingin' Summer***, which was a marked change from the orchestra's traditional 'choral oriented' Christmas. Along with vocal soloists Veronica Mitchell and Jason Morley (at times solo, together and then combined with participatory 'audience singing') the concert had a mix of well-known Christmas Carols plus audience 'participatio'). Non-Christmas oriented marches and jazz-influenced music as well as the confidently performed medley of both original Australian and Australian versions of Christmas Carols by William G. James entitled *James' Christmas Medley* were also enjoyed.

To begin this performance in the Mooroolbark parish of St Margaret's Uniting Church, the orchestra performed it's most 'tricky' opening work of the year, a rhythmically demanding (and 'agility' testing) chamber orchestra arrangement of Scott Joplin's *Original Rags* which it performed tightly and with confidence, to the complete delight of the audience.

Continuing on the orchestras 'run' of performing musically rewarding works which are 'unheralded' was its performance of Marshal Fine's *Two Hungarian Carols* for string orchestra. It's believed that this simple yet evocative work based on a traditional Hungarian Carol had never been performed before in Australia prior to this possible 'Australian Premiere' performance, which Fine had heard and then adapted. The orchestra learnt this work in under 3 rehearsals but still conquered it in performance which was particularly pleasing due to the 'exposed nature' of some of the melodic lines in it. Playing music which is both quiet and slow (while managing to maintain a quality

'tone') is deceptively difficult and the orchestra noticeably improved in that aspect in this concert.

Shortly before the interval came good performances by both vocal soloists and orchestra of two songs, Mozart's *Ave Verum* corpus was appropriately 'flowing' yet musically 'tight' and the title song of the musical *Singin' in the Rain*, with 'cheeky' and charming solo vocals by Jason Morley (fantastically repeated as an impromptu 'encore' at the concert's end). At times there were admittedly some pronounced balance issues between the volume of the vocalists and the orchestra (mostly owing to the venue's challenging acoustic) however the DRO's familiarity with accompanying individual voices (as opposed to a full choir) is growing nicely.

The concert's penultimate programmed work was John Phillip Sousa's famous *Liberty Bell March* and 'boy'...was it well performed! Having a time signature of 6/8, and needing to be both musically and dynamically highly accurate to satisfy virtually anyone who hears it (due to it literally being 'world-famous'), it is much trickier to conquer than it may initially appear. The orchestra carried that (and the following work) off with 'aplomb', delivering the two most confident and 'approaching perfect' individual performances of the entire year.

To all but end the concert (prior to a fantastically performed encore reprising of *Singin' in the Rain* by Jason Morley and the orchestra), the concert then musically changed to "something completely different" with a very nuanced rendition of Handel's *Hallelujah Chorus* (from his oratorio *The Messiah*) which ended the DRO's afternoon and performance year on a very, very high note.

December Soiree

A regular 'end of year occurrence' for the orchestra, an expanded musical 'Soiree' occurred on 5th December which involved many fun, collaborative chamber performances by a mix of musicians from different sections of the

orchestra. There were a large variety of solo, duet, trio, quartet, quintet and sextet ensemble performances, each performing for each other (following very short separate preparation sessions).

Summary and 'Signing off' as Musical Director

In short, 2016 was a highly productive year of change at the DRO where the orchestra grew and developed in various ways, constantly accompanied by its members' characteristic enthusiasm, commitment and determination.

While I'm sad to be vacating the role of Conductor for the DRO due to other conflicting commitments I am very glad to have had the opportunity to work with and help develop this beautiful ensemble. I will fondly remember my time with DRO and I look forward to witnessing its continued development under a new conductor.

I thank the orchestra for many lovely experiences and I hope that it's musicians, audiences, committee members and supporters alike thoroughly enjoyed the orchestra's 2016 performances.

To music and life!

Robert Dora

Outgoing Chief Conductor & Musical Director of the Dandenong Ranges
Orchestra