



'At least one Australian orchestra should be led by an Australian conductor.'

Simone Young

By HARRIET CUNNINGHAM



Simone Young is about to go on holiday. On a cruise. She's tickled pink by the idea. She will join the MS Europa at Hamburg, then cruise around Britain, via the Orkney Isles, and back across the Baltic to Hamburg.

Of course, it will not be all rest and relaxation. Young will be there to judge the Stella Maris International Vocal Competition, an exclusive sing-off between eight people selected from the young artist programs from the world's top six opera houses. During the two-week cruise, she will jump ship for two days, flying to London to conduct concerts at St Paul's Cathedral, before rejoining the cruise in Edinburgh. For someone who is renowned for working insane hours, it is a holiday, of sorts.

With her busy schedule, it is only a fortuitous cancellation that allows her to make a flying visit to Sydney this month for an intriguing concert. She will conduct the first performance of the Australian World Orchestra, a sort of Wallabies of classical music, made of the pick of Australian musicians working here and internationally. It is the creation of Australian conductor Alexander Briger and his sister, Gabrielle Thompson, who have spent the past two years assembling the musicians and finding the money for their dream team.

The four-concert series is dedicated to Briger's uncle, the legendary Sir Charles Mackerras, who was planning to conduct one of the concerts before his death last year.

"At first, I genuinely thought it would be an impossible task," Young says. "I'm so impressed that they've got it happening and I think it's something that's

really going to catch the imagination of a lot of people.

"The idea of the cultural diaspora, the musical diaspora coming home, is really exciting."

She speaks with experience because she is very much part of that diaspora. Because although she is perhaps best known in Australia for her three years at the helm of Opera Australia, it was no more than a brief interlude in a career that has kept her away from home since the mid-1980s.

"There is no place on Earth I would rather live than Sydney," Young says on the phone from Hamburg, where she holds the dual positions of chief executive and artistic director of Hamburg's symphony orchestra and opera company.

"It's where I was born, it's the most extraordinarily beautiful city.

"That said, being able to combine living there with international-level music-making is almost an impossible dream. People who grow up in Britain or grow up in Germany or grow up in America can't do it in their own countries. They just have the advantage that travelling to other countries is so much shorter. That's really the only difference. We are musicians by nature and gypsies by necessity."

Before Hamburg, before Opera Australia, Young did the hard yards, working as assistant to James Conlon at Cologne Opera, then as assistant to the great pianist-turned-conductor Daniel Barenboim, at Paris and Bayreuth. She soon earned enough of a reputation to secure engagements with high-profile orchestras in Berlin, London, New York, Paris and beyond.

It reads like the classic career path of a successful young conductor but it is hard to imagine how tough it must have been. Not least because during this period she and her husband, Greg Condon, were bringing up a family. Young's eldest daughter, Yvann, is now 23, a graduate of Oxford University, recently married, living and working in Britain. Her younger daughter, Lucy, is 14 and, according to Young, a "mad-keen musician", playing harp, piano and violin. Young was 7½ months pregnant with Lucy when she conducted the legendary Vienna Philharmonic, a notoriously conservative band that had, up until then, resolutely declined to hire women musicians (with the exception of the harpist). Young is now one of its regular guest conductors.

"There were times when exhaustion took over," she says of the early years. "It usually happened when you arrived in a new city and there'd be trouble with the flights and the nanny hadn't got there. You pick up the keys, go to the apartment and it's on

the fifth floor and the elevator is out of order. And you've got three suitcases, a stroller and an 18-month-old who's crying and hungry and tired. And you end up sitting on the second floor landing crying and hungry and tired yourself! They were gruelling years but if I hadn't put myself through that I simply would not be where I am today."

Which is where? As the head of one of the leading opera houses in Europe and in demand to conduct top-ranking orchestras across the US, Europe and Asia, she is in a commanding position. She was named conductor of the year by German magazine *Opernwelt* in 2006 and was a judge on the 2008 BBC series *Maestro*. Her latest artistic conquest in Hamburg is the ultimate operatic nerd fest, an acclaimed staging of Wagner's *Ring* cycle.

A high-profile music commentator and author of *The Maestro Myth*, Norman Lebrecht, describes her as one of the leaders in her field and a contender for the next big music director vacancy – he tosses around names such as Berlin, Covent Garden and the Met.

One thing, however, is certain: wherever she goes when her contract expires in 2015, it will not be Australia. Not while the issues that precipitated her departure from Opera Australia remain.

When Young took up the role of artistic director, her brief was widely publicised: she was to improve musical standards and build an orchestra capable of exploring a more ambitious, challenging repertoire. However, a perfect storm of politics, financial troubles and the world-shattering events of September 11, 2001, left the company without the resources or the resolve to fund her vision. She had always maintained she would leave the position rather than compromise artistic standards but, in 2002, the Opera Australia board made the decision for her, announcing that her three-year contract would not be renewed.

Ten years on, and the situation in Australia is, if anything, worse, with an Australia Council report only last month suggesting that Australia's national opera company might manage without a full-time orchestra altogether.

Young's reaction? "I don't believe one can be serious about artistic standards and not maintain a permanent orchestra."

The conductor makes a point of visiting Australia regularly, partly to see family but also to conduct. But there is no chance of an extended visit to Sydney any time soon.

"I would hate to think that I would never go back and spend long stretches of time in Australia. And I'm sure I will. But I can't turn my back on Europe ... And, of course, now that my daughter's married a Scot, they're

Australian World Orchestra

THE Australian World Orchestra gives its first concerts in Sydney this month. The four-day festival brings together Australian players from Vancouver, Stuttgart, Tokyo, Vienna and New York, all the state orchestras and four members of the Australian Youth Orchestra.

At the Opera House, Simone Young conducts the first concert on August 26, featuring the Prelude and Venusberg Music from Wagner's opera *Tannhauser*, Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony and Peter Sculthorpe's *Earth Cry*, with didgeridoo soloist William Barton.

Composer and former violist with the Berlin Philharmonic, Brett Dean, conducts his own composition for orchestra and choir, *Vexations and Devotions*, on August 27.

Barton gives didgeridoo demonstrations and Alexander Briger leads a singalong version of Beethoven's *Ode to Joy* at a family matinee on August 28.

Finally, the orchestra teams up with 75 students for a children's concert at Parramatta's Riverside on August 29.

See australianworldorchestra.com.au.

going to be over here in the northern hemisphere. Which means that half of our life will be, too."

But should there be more opportunities for home-grown conductors such as, say, Alexander Briger?

She laughs drily.

"I think there should be at least one Australian orchestra led by an Australian conductor ... because we risk losing these people. But the reality of the financial situation in this country is the state orchestras and state opera companies are all out there competing for the sponsorship dollar, the marketing interest and the media interest and it's easier to sell the story of somebody coming from somewhere glamorous than somebody you've seen grow up at the Conservatorium.

"The first time they come back it's a story. The third time they come back it isn't."

As for Young, she still has four years at Hamburg and is focused on plans there.

As she reels off operas, orchestral work and the names of composers, Young exudes a sense of commitment and intellectual passion that might seem overwhelming if it were not so lacking in self-consciousness.

What is overwhelmingly apparent is that this is someone whose artistic vision needs a grand canvas, a canvas on a scale her homeland simply cannot provide.