

CONDUCTORS CONNECTING WITH THE COMMUNITY

by Carolyn Watson

To use the words of Willie Nelson, 'these are difficult times'. Challenges facing our orchestras, opera companies and other arts organisations mirror a volatile global economic climate. Possibly more than ever, the sustainability of our arts companies is subject to increasing scrutiny and pressure. Fortunately, some orchestras here and internationally have been quick to adapt and deft in their response, leading the way with a variety of community-based initiatives.

American conductor Marin Alsop is a leading figure in this respect. Widely regarded as an innovator, Alsop is credited with rejuvenating and re-energising the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra (BSO), of which she became music director in 2007. Under Alsop's tenure, the Baltimore Symphony has strengthened its position as one of the leading US orchestras and won praise for its pioneering education and outreach programs. At a time when subscriber bases and audience numbers have been in general and steady decline, Alsop and the BSO have enjoyed a period of strong growth.

With assistance from the American-Australian Organisation's Dame Joan Sutherland Fund, I was fortunate to observe Alsop's work in Baltimore earlier this year. At the core of the BSO's community outreach work is the *Rusty Musicians* project, which offers amateur musicians the opportunity to perform side by side in concert with the members of the Baltimore Symphony.

The 'rusty musicians' come from all walks of life. Some work in disciplines associated with music such as arts administration and education, while many others have completely independent careers. Alsop explains that 'the idea behind it was to reach out to people who played instruments as kids or who play in amateur orchestras and do something else for a profession'. Having prepared their parts independently, they are joined by the BSO professionals in an open workshop situation culminating in a performance of the chosen work. She continues: 'Music is all about bringing the community together – it's a social experience, it's an emotional journey, it's something we want to share and by doing this we want to reach out



Carolyn Watson

to the community in new and bigger ways.' Over six hundred rusty musicians signed up for the orchestra's first project – an overwhelming response. Family and friends are invited, and free admission ensures a healthy audience.

Closer to home a new orchestra shares in part a similar agenda. Established in 2010, the Tasmania Discovery Orchestra (TDO) is a unique blend of professional, student and community musicians serving a number of aims. Based at the University of Tasmania (UTAS), the TDO was the brainchild of conductor and former Head of School at the Conservatorium, Kevin Purcell.

Among the principal aims of the TDO is to 'better recognise the contribution that musicians and playing music makes to Australian communities', explains Briony Buys, music programs and publicity officer at the University of Tasmania. 'The TDO is for orchestra-trained musicians who may not have the chance to perform regularly within their own community, but who appreciate the opportunity to perform outstanding orchestral music with other accomplished musicians in a professional setting.'

The TDO also offers distinct advantages to the student musicians who form the largest component of the orchestra. As an ensemble of the UTAS Conservatorium of Music, musicians are credited with a series of performance units contributing towards the requirements of their degree program. Additionally, members are paid a fee for each rehearsal and players travelling from interstate also receive a contribution towards their travel expenses.

Players from around Australia join

with Tasmanian-based musicians for concerts four times a year. Rehearsals are concentrated over a long weekend, with the orchestra first meeting Friday afternoon and performing the subsequent Sunday afternoon. The response to the TDO has been an enthusiastic one from players and the community alike.

Conductor Myer Fredman, who has worked regularly with the orchestra since its inception, also lists some specific musical goals among the objectives of the TDO. He wants to 'provide players with an opportunity to work on the less familiar and/or neglected masterpieces, as distinct from the standard works that major orchestras are compelled to perform because of box office considerations'. The TDO is committed to enlarging the Australian content of programs alongside 20th and 21st century music in general.

Fredman also highlights the mentoring role the orchestra provides in nurturing young talent, explaining that the orchestra 'provides an immeasurable opportunity for advanced student players to work alongside seasoned professionals to imbibe the vital disciplines that are expected of them when joining a major orchestra'. Young, emerging conductors and soloists are engaged in the interest of developing talent. Fredman's informal approach to presentation involves introducing each piece to the audience, and is a far cry from elitism.

The challenge of our time means it is imperative to be an innovator, to bring music to new audiences or, maybe more accurately, to bring new audiences to music. Exploring new music and different interpretations, fresh and flexible methods of presentation and ways of engaging with the broader community, are all intrinsic to continued success. It seems Marin Alsop and the Baltimore Symphony have discovered a wonderful method and the Tasmania Discovery Orchestra is well on track to establishing itself as a similarly pioneering ensemble. □

Carolyn Watson is associate conductor of the TDO, conductor-in-residence at the Conservatorium High School and assistant chorusmaster of Sydney Philharmonia Choirs.