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Rhoderick McNeill, Barry Spurr, Zoltán Szabó

Quadrant Music Reviews

Rhoderick McNeill

Symphony No. 4
by Andrew Schultz
West Australian Symphony Orchestra, Otto Tausk
Winthrop Hall
7.30 p.m., June 20, 2025

Perhaps best known for his cantata *Journey to Horseshoe Bend*, Andrew Schultz is one of Australia's finest living composers of symphonies. Each of his four symphonies has notable characteristics. The First (1998), a choral symphony titled *In Tempore Stellae*, is a masterly three-movement work for soloists, chorus and orchestra which successfully integrates texts and music throughout. Its point of initial reference was Luciano Berio's *Sinfonia*, but the musical language incorporates modal melody and harmony into an otherwise contemporary sound. The Second, *Ghosts of Reason* (2008), is purely for orchestra. It is cast in one continuous eighteen-minute movement that builds gradually from a chaconne-like, pervasive repeating four-chord pattern towards a glorious and huge climax. The Third, *Century* (2012), returns to an expansive three-movement design. It was commissioned for a public performance in Canberra to commemorate the centenary of Walter Burley Griffin's design of the city.

The new Fourth Symphony, first heard in Perth on June 20, was commissioned for the West Australian Symphony Orchestra by Geoff Stearn. Like the First and Third, this is also a large, expansive work; this time in four movements but lacking any overall programmatic intention. The four movements are, respectively, entitled "Expansive", "Circle Dance", "Chorale" and "Gothic Burlesque". The Fourth is scored for the standard full orchestra, with each string section divided into two parts. Excepting the timbral similarities which begin each movement, I did not note any cyclic linkage of musical material between movements.

On encountering a new piece of music, a simple question arises: "Would I want to hear it again?" In this case, the answer is "Yes"—resoundingly! The musical language is accessible to a typical audience of classical art music and immediately enjoyable. Through my membership of the Australian Music Centre, I was able to access a digital score of the work, which assisted me in following Schultz's intricate scoring. I explored the work through ABC Classic's July 17 broadcast of its June 20 premiere; as this broadcast was recorded and made digitally available, I have affirmed the following judgments after several hearings.

Each of the four movements begins with chimes or bell-like sonorities. In the first movement, "Expansive", the music builds from the opening chimes and impressionistic horn calls over sustained string harmonies towards dramatic incidents, inspired by the composer's experience of viewing falling ice sheets in the Arctic. The horn calls then introduce a surging, climactic middle section suggesting the raw power of nature. Schultz suggests two or more speeds at once: the element of great forward propulsion underpinned by slow-moving underlying harmonies, recalling the sonic vistas of the accelerating sections of the first movement of Sibelius's Fifth. The music then eases back in tempo and restates the horn calls of the opening section. "Expansive" encapsulates traditional ways of using the orchestra and modality, which we might associate with early twentieth-century composers like Sibelius, Nielsen or even Debussy (such as in, for example, *La Mer*), as well as the crisp, pulsing sonorities of contemporary post-minimalists like John Adams.

"Circle Dance" represents the symphony's scherzo. It is based on an ancient East Timorese children's dance and builds from simple textures to a pulsing rhumba. An initial melody permeates the music, picking up a number of contrapuntal partners as it dances, some of which are gentle, others

of which are garish and bizarre. For me, the music captures similar feelings to those I hear expressed in Graeme Koehne's *Powerhouse*.

"Chorale", the slow movement, is an elegiac meditation of great beauty. Slower-moving outer sections frame a glorious stream of melody in the centre. This music is an unashamed embrace of rich triadic harmony that would have been impossible for, excepting Malcolm Arnold and Malcolm Williamson, a serious art music composer during the high point of modernism fifty-five or sixty years ago. Yet, even so, the density of the divided string writing and the glint of the orchestration retains a contemporary feel that is familiar in cinema's evocations of vast landscapes and romantic ecstasy.

As a fast finale, "Gothic Burlesque" recaptures some of the more garish elements of the scherzo to expand upon them. The movement features a persistent harmonic progression and a banal thematic refrain that bores into the listener's mind as a persistent earworm; these features define the movement's opening and closing sections. In the middle of this bizarre and blatantly disturbing music emerges a glitzy waltz, complete with cheeky trumpet flourishes, which themselves develop a feverish intensity. An Adams-like, "minimalist" parody of the interminable cadence sequences one finds in, for instance, the finales of Beethoven's Third and Fifth brings the high exuberance of the music to a riotous conclusion. Is it fitting to incorporate the glitz and glamour of the nightclub within the sanctity of the symphonic tradition? I think that Mahler and Shostakovich would have no trouble with this "worldly" intrusion; one thinks of the circus-like antics of the Russian composer's finales in his Sixth and Ninth, or the middle movements of Mahler's Ninth. Also, Schultz's finale provides a soul-connection to the second movement, just as "Expansive" and "Chorale" share in the awe of, respectively, nature and the divine.

The rich musical experience contained within this Fourth exemplifies the relatively little-known but extensive body of symphonic music that should be performed, recorded and celebrated as some of the best art originating from Australia. Let us hope successive performances of this symphony follow its premiere.

Professor Rhoderick McNeill is a musicologist whose authoritative work concerns the Australian symphonic literature.

Slower-moving outer sections frame a glorious stream of melody in the centre. This music is an unashamed embrace of rich triadic harmony.

Barry Spurr

Rusalka
by Antonín Dvořák
Opera Australia
Sydney Opera House
7 p.m., July 26, 2025
★★★★★

By far the most popular of Dvořák's operas, *Rusalka* (1900-01) features one of the composer's best-known works, the lovely soprano aria addressed to the moon. So far as the opera's performance history is concerned, it is noteworthy, given its current popularity in the repertoire, that while it had its premiere in Prague in March 1901, it was not performed in Britain until 1950, and in America until 1975. The production by Opera Australia in 2007, with Richard Hickox conducting and Cheryl Barker in the title role, won the Helpmann Award for Best Opera.

The extraordinary story of Rusalka, a water sprite from Slavic mythology, was derived from Czech fairy tales in the libretto by Jaroslav Kvapil. This intelligent and sumptuous 2025 production brought out, arrestingly, that essential characteristic—and customarily starkly-drawn contrast—of fairy tale, the contest of ideas of good and evil. Dvořák was a devout Catholic, and a theological subtext underpins the work, intensifying as it reaches its climactic conclusion, with the restoration (some see it as ambiguous, but it is redemption-like) of Rusalka to her submarine sisterhood, after a protracted and troubled engagement with the terrestrial human world of love and materialism. Transgressing the natural order, in her longing for human romance, she is willing to lose her voice (a handicap in opera, which Nicole Car handles with consummate dramatic skill in those scenes) and renounce immortality. Idealising the Prince—and Gerard Schneider was perfectly cast as the leading man—their love, nonetheless, is doomed.

This production, superbly directed by Sarah Giles and masterfully conducted by Johannes Fritzsch, is rightly sung in the original language to which the composer set his score, and which should be the case with all of opera. As Moffatt Oxenbould points out in his excellent history of Opera Australia, *Timing is Everything* (2005): "The quality of many available translations was