

MEDIA RELEASE

IT'S A FAMILY AFFAIR

Sydney Symphony celebrates Australia's most distinguished musical family when Sir Charles Mackerras returns for two concert programs & Alex Briger conducts 'Don John of Austria'

Sydney, October - Sir Charles Mackerras returns to Sydney for a much anticipated visit to the Orchestra he once called his own, to share in the Sydney Symphony's 75th birthday season. As a teenager the young Charles Mackerras was the Orchestra's principal oboe player and a stand-out musician. Later he became its first Australian Chief Conductor and he remains to this day, paternally attached. Sir Charles conducts two series of concerts that celebrate his dual strengths: Janáček and Mozart. Sandwiched between the two concert series will be two performances by his nephew Alex Briger, who grants Sir Charles' long-standing wish for an Australian performance of the ballad opera 'Don John of Austria' written by their ancestor, Sir Isaac Nathan. October is a month of family celebrations as the Sydney Symphony welcomes back Sir Charles, joins him in passing the baton to Alex Briger as the next generation, and celebrates the musical dynasty that is the Mackerras/Briger family.

Sir Charles Mackerras was born in the USA to Australian parents, and grew up from an early age in Sydney. A strong-willed and passionate family, the Mackerras' were a strong force in Sydney society bound together not just by blood but a shared love for politics, music, education and great conversation. As a child Charles was captivated by music and become one of the youngest ever musicians to be appointed to the Sydney Symphony in a principal position. Still young, he left Sydney for Europe in the late 1940's where he fell quickly in love and married clarinettist Judy Wilkins (his mother sent a friend to 'give her the once over') before seizing an opportunity to study in Czechoslovakia. The move was a fortuitous one as Charles discovered a passion for the music of the nation, establishing himself over the coming years as an exponent of Janacek in particular. He subsequently forged a second field of expertise, in the works of Mozart. Today few conductors have as broad a repertoire.

Sir Charles returns to the Sydney Symphony as an honoured guest conductor in October 2007 and his first concert, entitled 'Sir Charles Mackerras Returns', represents a kind of 'potted history' of Czech music, including Smetena's bohemian tone poem Vltava (The Moldau), Dvorak's cosmopolitan Symphony No. 7, and Janáček's glorious Sinfonietta. Representing some of the most loved and recognisable themes in orchestral music, these works capture the sophisticated emotions of a country in the throes of establishing independence and identity, a kind of modernism that resonates well with audiences of the 'new worlds', Australia and the USA.

In his second concert 'Mozart's Great C Minor Mass', Sir Charles presents the unfinished but magical work intended as a showcase for the composer's new wife alongside the ultimate tone poem, Richard Strauss' epic Thus Spake Zarathustra. Perhaps the most well-known of all orchestral works, Zarathustra has most famously been used as the theme for the film *2001: A Space Odyssey* and aptly it is inspired by Nietzsche's philosophical writings, intended as a kind of homage to human potential. The Mozart C Minor Mass pairs together two of Australia's leading sopranos Yvonne Kenny and Emma Matthews, representing the reigning and rising stars in one unique partnership, along with Steve Davislim (tenor) and Paul Whelan (bass) and the Sydney Philharmonia Choirs.

Sir Charles Mackerras is as renowned for his expertise in arranging and orchestrating works as he is for conducting, and one of his dreams for many years has been to facilitate a professional Australian performance of Don John of Austria, Australia's first ever opera. The piece was originally conducted by its composer Isaac Nathan, who is Sir Charles' decendent. The first performance was in a small theatre in Sydney's George St, and it is of great sentimental and musical importance to the Mackerras/Briger family that it now has a modern presentation under the baton of a family member, Alex Briger, the great, great, great, great grandson of Isaac Nathan.

Sydney Symphony's concert performances of 'Don John' will feature a revised version of the original libretto, updated for a 21st Century audience but maintaining its unique 'heritage' character. Dramaturg Gordon K. Williams reworked the text after going back to the classic French drama by Casimir Delavigne. Director Rodney Fisher collaborates with the Sydney Symphony and Alex Briger, bringing to the project a substantial background knowledge about early Australian theatre and Isaac Nathan the man. While retaining the original song texts by Jacob L Montefiore, some of the dialogue sections of this ballad-style opera have been revised to provide more historical context – the story of Don John, though little-known today, was considered one of the great sagas at the time this opera was written. The Orchestra is joined by a dream cast of Australian vocal talent: Cheryl Barker, Steve Davislim, Paul Whelan, Sally-Anne Russell and Timothy Dufore. This project has been produced by Raff Wilson, Artistic Administration Manager of Sydney Symphony.

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Isaac Nathan is a fascinating Jewish Australian figure with ties to the British royal family and Lord Byron. Before emigrating from London, Nathan was a popular singing teacher, catering to the aristocracy. His pupils included Princess Charlotte, daughter of the Prince Regent, who appointed Nathan to the position of Royal Music Librarian. He was also a friend and collaborator of Lord Byron whom he asked to supply words for ancient Hebrew melodies he claimed to have discovered. Byron supplied, not just the requested one or two poems, but 26 collectively titled *The Hebrew Melodies*, the best-known of which is *She walks in beauty like the night*. He wrote several operettas and two operas including *Don John of Austria*, using as its framework the popular story on which many 19th century operas had also been based. Arriving in Sydney in 1841 he established himself as an important musician, working as choirmaster, composer and singing teacher at St Mary's Cathedral. Nathan was accidentally killed by Sydney's first horse-drawn tram on King St, and is buried at St Stephen's Church in Newtown.

Born in Australia, Alexander Briger waited for several years before telling his uncle of his deep desire to become a conductor, but his first performance before the esteemed conductor was met with great enthusiasm and encouragement, and Sir Charles even invited him to assist on several performances. Briger recalls the moment he was inspired to follow in his famous uncle's footsteps – it was a performance of Mahler's Fourth Symphony with Sir Charles conducting the Sydney Symphony. Briger was 12. In the coming years he quickly became an accomplished musician and made his professional debut at around 20.

Alex Briger won 1st prize at the International Competition for Conductors in the Czech Republic in 1993. He later worked closely with Sir Charles Mackerras and Pierre Boulez and made his debut with Opera Australia in 1998 conducting *Jenůfa*. Operatic work has since included *Madama Butterfly*, *Così fan tutte*, *Cunning Little Vixen* and *Le Nozze di Figaro* (Opera Australia), *The Rape of Lucretia* (Royal Opera House, Covent Garden), *Die Zauberflöte* (Glyndebourne Festival), *La Bohème* (State Opera of South Australia), Bartók ballets (Opera du Rhin) as well as the premiere of Simon Holt's *Who put Bella in the Wych'elm* for the Aldeburgh Festival. He has performed regularly with the Philharmonia Orchestra and the London Philharmonic Orchestra, opening their 2003 'Friday Series' in London and touring with them to China in 2003/4; and the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group, with whom he made his BBC Proms and Berlin Festival debuts.

He has also worked with the Orchestre de Paris for the opening of the 2004 "Musica Festival", Scottish Chamber Orchestra, with whom he conducted the final concert of the 2004 Edinburgh Festival, City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, Berliner Sinfonie-Orchester, BBC Symphony Orchestra, BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, Swedish Radio Orchestra, Orchestre National du Capitole de Toulouse, Frankfurt Radio Orchestra, Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie, Academy of St. Martin in the Fields, Salzburg Mozarteum, Salzburg Camerata, Ensemble InterContemporain, London Sinfonietta, collaborating with Peter Sellars and pianist Helene Grimaud for the premiere of Arvo Part's *Lamentate*, Melbourne Symphony Orchestra and Japanese Virtuoso Symphony.

ABC Classic FM will broadcast live 'Sir Charles Mackerras Returns' on Fri 12 Oct and 'Mozart's Great C Minor Mass' on Wed 24 Oct. ABC Classics will also record 'Don John of Austria' for broadcast (Nov 11) and CD release in early 2008.

The Australian Jewish Museum will host a special event featuring a panel discussion of Isaac Nathan and Don John of Austria at 8pm on Thurs 11 Oct. Panellists include: Joseph Toltz, cantor of Temple Emmanuel, Rodney Fisher, director Gordon Williams, dramaturg. Sir Charles Mackerras will also attend.

MEDIA OPPORTUNITIES

Sir Charles in rehearsal with Sydney Symphony: 11.30am, Tuesday 9 October

Alex Briger in rehearsal with Sydney Symphony: 3.30pm Tues 16 October

Alex Briger interviews: Morning Tues 16 October (+ others on request)

MEDIA ENQUIRIES: Imogen Corlette t: 02 9337 5466 // m: 0410 520 776 // e: imogencorlettepr@gmail.com

Concert details

CONCERT

Thurs 11 Oct, 1.30pm

Fri 12 Oct, 8pm

Sat 13 Oct, 2pm

Concert Hall, Sydney Opera House

PROGRAM

Sir Charles Mackerras Returns

DVOŘÁK Symphony No.7

SMETANA Vltava (The Moldau)

JANÁČEK Sinfonietta

Thurs 18 Oct, 8pm

Sat 20 Oct, 8pm

City Recital Hall, Angel Place

Don John of Austria – Celebrating Australia's Musical Heritage

ISAAC NATHAN

(Concert presentation)

Wed 24 Oct, 8pm

Fri 26 Oct, 8pm

Sat 27 Oct, 8pm

Concert Hall, Sydney Opera House

Mozart's Great C Minor Mass

R STRAUSS *Thus Spake Zarathustra*

MOZART Great C Minor Mass, K427

Bookings:

Tickets from \$49. To book call Sydney Symphony on 8215 4600 or visit www.sydney-symphony.com