

John Curro

AN ACCIDENTAL CONDUCTOR

The Queensland Youth Orchestras' founder has been mentor, guru and all round musical legend for a generation of Australian musicians. **Suzannah Conway** talks to him about a life in music and other pursuits

Knowing how punctual John Curro is, I arrive at his splendid New Farm house precisely on time. From his home perched on a cliff high above the Brisbane River there is an amazing 180-degree view across the river to the Story Bridge and city skyline. John is already waiting, sitting in a favourite spot overlooking his garden and listening to the butcher birds, who he likes to feed with pieces of cheese. This is his haven where he can relax and enjoy precious free moments amid his still frenetic lifestyle, as Director of Music and conductor of the Queensland Youth Orchestras (QYO) as well as teaching 20 or more regular students. Now in his 85th year, John Curro shows no obvious signs of slowing down from the music-filled life he loves, with a mind as sharp and focused as ever, even if the body has a few aches and pains.

John's gracious wife, Carmel, hovers as we enter the house offering coffee, settling him into a comfortable chair at the dining table for our chat. It is a well-loved home where they have lived for over 30 years, with friends, family, students and musicians coming and going frequently. John admits cheerfully that his life

would be completely impossible without Carmel. "She is absolutely my rock and a total inspiration for me – I have no ability to survive without her," he says disarmingly. Carmel is a trained singer and musician and she and John were married in the same year that the Queensland Youth Orchestra began in 1966, both now as John says in "their 51st year of a splendid marriage".

We also talk about his five children and their grandchildren, of whom he is justifiably immensely proud. Following the family tradition, Monica, Sarah, David and Daniel are all musicians – both girls are violinists in the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, David a part-time violinist and full-time teacher, while Daniel is a specialist baroque cellist. Curro jokes that his elder son, Jonathan, who works in computers "is the only one with a proper job and a normal life!". He is at pains to tell me that none of the children were forced into music, though Carmel did teach them all to sing and learn piano. "But they made the choices themselves," he says, "to learn and appreciate music, to be part of the QYO – it is very much part of their DNA and I am very proud of them all."

John Curro is the founder of the QYO, which has been a training ground for talented young



Queensland musicians aged between eight and 25 for over 50 years now. From modest beginnings, there are now some 480 musicians in the organisation's three symphony orchestras, two wind and brass ensembles, a junior strings ensemble and a big band.

How did it all start and was he passionate about music from an early age? "No, I wasn't," he admits. "My early passion and throughout my school years was playing cricket. My dad, an Italian immigrant, played the violin so I had lessons, but he wanted a 'proper' career for his son so I was sent to the University of Queensland to study architecture as I enjoyed drawing too. The reason that I got into music was totally accidental when I was introduced to Alfredo Campoli while at UQ, who invited me to hear him play the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto with the Queensland Symphony Orchestra. Reluctantly I went along to my first ever concert and was instantly hooked, deciding then and there that I wanted to be a musician and so I took up the violin again."

He explains that, like his entry into music, the QYO also was an accident. He was asked to put together a combined secondary schools' orchestra and auditioned students from all over Brisbane, choosing 86 for the concert, which he says was "not exactly the Berlin Philharmonic!" Nevertheless, afterwards the students came to him saying how much they had enjoyed the experience and could the orchestra continue. "That was how the QYO began in 1966," he says. "It was very much a case of the blind leading the blind at the beginning," self-deprecatingly attributing much of its success to those who inspired and mentored him. "I learned alongside the players in those early years and was good at bringing out other people's visions," he says. Conductor, Ezra Rachlin, was a major influence and suggested splitting the orchestra into two, when John could see no improvement in their playing. "That helped the better players to become the Queensland Youth

Symphony in 1967 while the less capable players could continue at their own pace in a second orchestra. And it worked!" John says.

As more players came on board, this led in due course to several orchestras and the success that QYO is today. He remembers fondly the first international tour to Lausanne in 1972, which included young musicians like Dene Oldling and Jeffrey Crellin. Since that auspicious start, the QYO has now undertaken 12 international tours and played over 70 concerts, as well as participating three times in the International Festival of Youth Orchestras.

He has conducted many major orchestras both in Australasia and overseas and has been offered some fairly lucrative positions from time to time, so why has he chosen to stay with the QYO? "I have always enjoyed music in an eclectic way," he says. "I love being my own boss and not being beholden to anyone. I worried in the early days what would happen to the youth orchestra if I went away? No-one had the passion that I had for it then, which was probably due to my being a late starter. We had so much in common, so much to share and learn. I turned down a major conducting position during the 80s because, by that stage, the orchestra was beginning to play really well and I wanted to enjoy that!"

Apart from the QYO's normal concert programme in 2017, there will be a tour to China at the end of the year and an exciting additional event as part of the Queensland Music Festival (QMF). Artistic Director, Katie Noonan, who studied at the Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University (QCGU) with John's son, Daniel, approached John as the founder of QYO to honour both his contribution to the QYO as well as to showcase the orchestra itself. John was happy to oblige and will conduct the intriguingly-titled *Hang* with the QYO that has been brought together by the QMF especially for the occasion and will be performed in the Concert

Hall of the Queensland Performing Arts Centre on July 29. The title is a wordplay on the instrument called a 'hang', which is a tuned copper drum. Internationally acclaimed Austrian hang soloist and drummer for Björk, Manu Delago, will feature in a world premiere concerto written by emerging Queensland composer Thomas Green.

John is delighted that a number of alumni will be returning to Brisbane in order to take part in the concert. "The Australian String Quartet's QYO alumnus, Dale Barltrop, will lead a small group

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featuring the Curro Quartet (Monica, Sarah, Daniel and David) alongside Katie Noonan and other prominent QYO alumni from the Melbourne and Queensland Symphony orchestras and Camerata," he says. "I am pleased to have four of my children in this special concert. That is very important to me."

John Curro's passion and total commitment to the QYO has been his life's work and he has inspired hundreds of students, many of whom have had or are enjoying illustrious careers. His will be a lasting legacy to the classical music world in Australia and he has been recognised in a myriad of awards, including honorary doctorates from the University of Queensland and Griffith University, as well as his appointment as a Member of the British Empire in 1981 and a Member of the Order of Australia in 1995. He was awarded a Centenary Medal in 2001 and last year, on the 50th Anniversary of the QYO, he became a Queensland Great. "Perhaps my most treasured award was winning the Don Banks Fellowship in 2003, from my peers, a real musician's award that meant a lot," he confides. "But I was also tickled pink by the MBE, as it was my first major award."

Always the gentleman, John walks me out to my car as I ask him what else is left in his life to achieve musically. He stops for a moment and says: "Apart from staring death in the face, which is a great achievement, musically it would have to be the Verdi Requiem, followed by *Gerontius*. While I have conducted many great choral works and a lot of the major repertoire, I am still hankering to do a Verdi Requiem, for which I have a singular passion. And I will do it one day, not so far away either." Then, having been an avid golfer for over 60 years, and with a twinkle in his eye, he adds "And I also want to get a hole-in-one!" as he waves good bye and wanders back into the house.

John Curro conducts *Hang* as part of Queensland Music Festival at Brisbane's QPAC on July 29

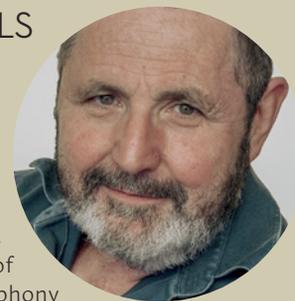
AUSSIE GREATS ON AN AUSSIE GREAT

RICHARD MILLS

John Curro gave me my first commission and my first opportunities to conduct. He also arranged lessons for me with Ezra Rachlin, then music director of the Queensland Symphony Orchestra. He has, similarly, formed so many artists through his own teaching and through Queensland Youth Orchestra, his contribution to our culture is rich, generous, humane, and a vital legacy for the future.

John is a great cultural leader and a great Australian, and he is a living national treasure. QYO has been the nursery for the next generation of outstanding musicians for many years now, offering young people challenges, inspiring peer example, and it is a genuine alternative to the superficiality of so much contemporary culture.

John's vision, which had humble beginnings, has sustained the organisation's spirit through a combination of hard work and dedication, through good as well as difficult times. His life has been one of tireless service to the community and has touched and enriched the lives of so many Australians. Finally, its magnitude transcends any possible description.



PAUL DEAN

John Curro believed in us all. Even if we weren't quite up to some of the music that he programmed for us in Queensland Youth Orchestra, somehow he made us believe that we were, and then all of a sudden, we did it!

John always managed to be encouraging whilst being stern, and he always expected the best that you could give – or better in some cases. He is the perfect blend of a 'pedagogue' and he is someone who I have modelled much of my own teaching style upon. The remarkable opportunities that he gave all of us seem incredible looking back, but at the time we just went along for this luxurious ride.

Brisbane would certainly have been a poorer place without QYO and without John Curro. As I now reach into my 50s, I regard him as a great friend, although sometimes, when we are chatting – after concerts or over lunch – there are parts of me that feel 17 again!

