

Maestro to the young

John Curro has been conducting the Queensland Youth Orchestra since its birth more than 50 years ago.

By **TIM DOUGLAS**

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Queensland Youth Orchestra founder John Curro at his home in Brisbane. Picture: Lyndon Mechielsen

‘It is horrible. Just hideous. Come on, listen to this,’ says John Curro, scurrying out of his living room to fiddle with an unseen audio system. He re-emerges as a vaguely familiar voice crackles through the set of antique timber speakers that hang in each corner of his home’s open-plan music room.

‘Ladies and gentlemen,’ a man’s voice begins. As if at the very memory of his own introduction to the nascent Queensland Youth Orchestra in its debut performance in 1965, the Brisbane conductor’s face concertinas in anguish. He theatrically covers his ears and winces. ‘That’s me at City Hall, 51 years ago.’ A blast of questionably tuned brass swirls around the room. ‘You know what this piece is called?’ he says, grinning. ‘It is Suite by Grieg, Arranged for Lousy Orchestra.’

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John Curro conducts the Queensland Youth Orchestra at the Queensland Music Festival.

Much has changed in the 51 years since the Brisbane conductor first tentatively raised a pine baton (he now uses fibreglass) to the orchestra that would become a driving force in his life. Not least is the sound. Curro loads a CD of a slick concert performance of Mozart by the QYO last year. Eyes closed, he allows a smile to reach across his face as we listen to his young charges at fully orchestral tilt. ‘You cannot imagine how much [the] sound has changed,’ he says, pointing to the speakers. ‘It took me 10 years to get that proper orchestral sound, to get nice balance and intonation.’

In its five decades, the QYO has grown in stature, credibility and size. The intervening years have seen the orchestra tour internationally and stake its claim as one of the most dynamic feeder ensembles in the country.

But in all that time there has been one constant: Curro. And for good reason: he is enshrined in the QYO’s constitution as music director for life.

“I’m not going anywhere,” he says, scooping up a mouthful of pumpkin soup made by his wife, Carmel. “I look forward to every rehearsal and performance. Some of the repertoire is, still now at the age of 81, as unfamiliar to me as it is to the kids. It’s marvellous.”

Later this month, the Queensland Music Festival will honour (for the record, Curro hates “that bloody word”) the long-time conductor’s commitment to and direction of the QYO with a specially commissioned concert and performance. QMF director Katie Noonan approached Brisbane composer Thomas Green to write a piece in honour of Curro to be played by QYO alumni for a new, youthful instrument: the hang. The percussion instrument — a closed metal drum, something of a mixture of marimba and steel drum — is less than 15 years old, not unlike many of Curro’s charges. *Concertino Grosso* will be performed on July 29 as part of a concert titled *Hang with the QYO* by London-based Austrian percussionist and hang virtuoso Manu Delago.

Noonan, who will perform in the concert, says Curro’s legacy runs deep in the veins of the Queensland music industry. “John has been a vital figure in fostering a world-class youth orchestra organisation over the past 50 years,” she says. “John’s dedication and passion has been the catalyst for a successful career for many of our country’s most revered musicians. It is important to honour John’s contribution to the Queensland and Australian music industries.”

Delago and Curro met briefly in March this year when the percussionist was touring Australia with his band, in between international gigs with Icelandic superstar Bjork. Until that point the instrument was foreign to the octogenarian conductor. “I’d never heard it until I saw some clips online,” he says. “The first time I heard it I thought ‘wow’. It sounds very beautiful, It is unlike any other percussion instrument. The closest would be the Jamaican drum. But it’s very beautiful.”

How does he feel about having such an honour bestowed on him?

“An honour? Oh cut it out,” he says with a laugh. “Whenever I got these awards, an AM, an MBE, a Premier’s Millennium award — that’s quite rare, there’s only one of those for the next thousand years — I was always very happy for my mother. But she’s gone now, so ...” Curro smiles. “Look, it’s really very nice. But the thing I really love about it is that the alumni are coming back. I love it when those kids come home. We have had some real hot shots.”

That list of “kids” now reads like a veritable who’s who of Australian classical music: they include Melbourne Symphony Orchestra concertmaster Dale Bartrop, internationally acclaimed composer Brett Dean, clarinetist Paul Dean, violinists Dene Olding and Ray Chen, flautist Tim Munro and oboe player Diana Doherty, among many others.

Bartrop and Doherty, as well as four of the conductor’s professional musician children — Sarah and Monica (MSO’s first and assistant principal second violin respectively), cellist Dan (Australian Brandenburg Orchestra) and violinist David — will be among the alumni performing at the festival.

“Yes, it will be very nice,” Curro says. He sits back and smiles, looking out over his music room, replete with pianos and a harpsichord and adorned with pictures of his family and his musicians.

Had someone told the young John Curro he would commit his life to classical music, the sports-mad non-musician might have walloped them with his cricket bat. His father played the fiddle, and Curro studied the instrument as a boy. But he gave up violin in his teenage years, when his family moved from Cairns to Brisbane, and focused instead on a career in architecture.

It was with a friend that, at age 19, Curro had what he describes as a musical epiphany.

“I played tennis with a friend of mine, an Italian doctor, every Sunday morning, and one day he said to me: ‘You’ll never guess who is coming to play tennis on Sunday — Alfredo Campoli.’”

“I looked at him and said, ‘Who’s that?’

Campoli, one of the world’s greatest violinists, was in Brisbane to perform with the Queensland Symphony Orchestra.

“My friend thought I’d be interested, because I’d learned violin as a child, but I wasn’t interested in that. What interested me was: is he any good at tennis?”

Campoli left two tickets for Curro to attend his concert. The architect-in-the-making had never attended a symphonic concert, nor had he any interest in orchestral music. Grudgingly, he accepted the offer (“after all, he was playing tennis with us again the following weekend”).

Curro’s eyes widen above his soup. “As soon as Campoli started to play, it was ... it was just like St Paul on the road to Damascus,” he says.

“I was completely struck with the beauty of this thing. I went home and told my father I was going to stop architecture and take up lessons immediately.”

His father, however, had other ideas. Curro finished his degree in architecture two years later while taking lessons on the violin in his spare time.

He moved to Rome, and found good tutors in Europe; he would play his instrument in the morning and work for the architects during the day. Curro returned to Brisbane three years later, “practised like mad”, and opened his own architecture office, playing chamber music concerts in his spare time.

Eventually, he was accepted into the QSO, where he spent two years as a practising musician. “And that was that,” he says, mopping up the bowl with a piece of bread. “Getting into conducting was another accidental story.”

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Curro has just finished an impassioned diatribe about the scourge of mobile phones when he pulls one from his pocket and starts cursing it.

“Bloody things,” he says, fiddling with a fluorescent screen. “Come on. Just do what you’re told. I’ve banned them [at QYO rehearsals]. They are forbidden. And I’ve seen them in some of [the musicians’] hands, in spite of that.

“Last time I saw one, I threatened I’d get a bucket of water ... the phone will go right into it.” He chuckles. “Of course the latest ones are waterproof ... ”

Curro might not share the youngsters’ passion for technology, but the similarities between him and his players goes some way towards explaining the orchestra’s dynamism.

“Because I never overpractised when I was very young — because I came to music so late — I never actually got sick if it,” he says.

“Picking it up at a later age, I always loved it. I loved practising. All the repertoire was always new for me. Every time [when in the QSO] I played a Brahms symphony, I would think ... this is glorious!

“Most of my fellow musicians had been hammering away at it since they were five. It was old hat. So when we started the QYO, me and the kids were on the same [wavelength]. They didn’t know the stuff, I didn’t know the stuff. So we got on pretty well.”

Before joining the QSO, Curro would organise concerts and musicals. It was there he met Carmel, who was a singer in the amateur productions Curro and his friends put on in Brisbane. During one performance of the musical

The Song of Norway, the conductor pulled out at the last minute. He called Curro and said, “Mate, you’ll have to do it.”

“I struggled through,” Curro says.

It was not long after that he got a request to put together a secondary schools orchestras for a festival in an elaborate bid to convince the education department of music’s importance to the curriculum.

“It was a complete flop,” the conductor says. “Nobody came from the department. But at the end of the concert, the kids came up to me and said how much fun they’d had and would I keep it going. And that was that. We haven’t stopped since. And I’ve loved every minute.”

Curro takes a new fibreglass baton from a plastic case. It’s a Mollard. He balances it gently between his thumb and forefinger, considering it. “I’ll use this one for the concert,” he says, though he prefers the old wooden numbers he used as a younger conductor. “I used to use pine, but they just break too easily.”

That questionable old recording is still bouncing around the home. Curro is beaming, gently wielding the baton. “They’re fine musicians and great kids. But I suppose I tend to smash the stand a bit. Because they are kids, and they don’t listen sometimes. Or they won’t look at you or they will fall asleep ... ”

Curro smiles. After 51 years, he wouldn’t have it any other way.

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Manu Delago, back left, with the Anoushka Shankar Ensemble in 2013. Picture: Getty Images

PIONEER HANGS WITH THE STARS

When a video of Manu Delago playing a radical new instrument — the hang — went viral in 2007, he almost called his lawyer. A fan without permission had taken the video from the Austrian percussionist’s website and uploaded it to YouTube, where it has now been seen by more seven million people.

“I was very surprised,” says the 32-year-old from his adopted home in London. “To be honest, I had no idea how YouTube worked back then. I thought ... is this fraud? Then you realise, ‘Wait a minute. This has had way more hits than on my site.’”

That’s when Delago’s life changed. The nascent pioneer of a strange-looking instrument with a strange shape and stranger sound was suddenly very much in demand. Some of music’s biggest names — including Icelandic superstar Bjork — began calling, and Delago has not stopped since. This month he will perform Thomas Green’s *Concertino Grosso* (for hang) with the Queensland Youth Orchestra in honour of long-time conductor John Curro. Delago is excited about introducing Brisbane audiences to the arcane world of his exotic instrument. “I think Tom’s composition is great, the way it has been put together,” he says. “It’s a very challenging thing to do ... to write for this instrument and an orchestra.”

The hang is a member of the idiophone family — in which sound is created by vibration without the use of strings or skins.

Having been invented in Switzerland less than 15 years ago, it is one of the youngest instruments in the world. The hang comprises two shells — an amalgam of steel and brass — welded to create a UFO-shaped drum, into the top (the ding) of which toned imprints are hammered around a central tuned note. The bottom side (the gu) of the instrument features a flat tuned surface.

Since the hang's launch in the European market in the noughties, Delago's name has become synonymous with the instrument.

"When I discovered it, I was playing a lot of marimba, drums and piano. Hang had all these things together in one instrument," he says. "It plays melody but also grooves and beats, so that was interesting ... But it also was a sound I hadn't heard before. I was curious to take it further and compose and perform with it."

How does he handle the notion of being a musical pioneer? "It's interesting. It's a new instrument, so there's no history," he says. "You can't study the great concertos of the past and see what others have done. It's not as logical as a piano or guitar, where you know where the notes are. Every hang actually is different."

It's that unique feature of the instrument that was one of the greatest challenges for Green's composition.

"I had quite a few conversations with Tom where he drew a huge bit of paper and drew a map of where the notes are," Delago says.

"It is a beautiful instrument. But it is beautiful and challenging at the same time."

Delago, who studied music and composition at Mozarteum University Salzburg and later London's Guildhall School and Trinity College, has spent the past decade touring the world with his collection of hangs. He performed with Bjork in 2013 and 2015 on her *Biophilia* tours, and spends the rest of his time as the frontman in his own band, Manu Delago Handmade, and performing with sitar player Anoushka Shankar.

He sees endless possibilities for the hang. "I'm always trying to find new ways to play it," he says, "be it incorporating electronics, or such things. It is important to find a way of finding a new voice through any instrument."

Hang with the QYO, featuring Manu Delago playing Concertino Grosso (for hang), is at the Queensland Performing Arts Centre on July 29.

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