

THE WINSTON CHURCHILL MEMORIAL TRUST OF AUSTRALIA

Report by - Luke Dollman - 2013 Churchill Fellow

THE DAME ROMA MITCHELL CHURCHILL FELLOWSHIP to observe and study teaching practices of the world's leading orchestral conducting teachers.

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Signed

Dated

Luke Dollman

29 September, 2014.

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## INTRODUCTION

I feel very privileged to have been awarded the 2013 Dame Roma Mitchell Churchill Fellowship. I had the great pleasure of meeting Dame Roma in 1996, and she played a key role in the development of the arts in South Australia through her philanthropic work. Thus, the award has a special significance for me.

The opportunity to travel to conducting masterclasses and summer schools throughout Europe and the United States has been of immense value to me. This has given me knowledge and experience that would have taken many years to acquire otherwise. I look forward to putting the lessons learned to use in my own teaching, and I hope that future generations of aspiring Australian conductors will benefit from this. In 2014 Australian conductors are still under-represented in the programs of Australian orchestras and opera companies, and one hopes that this will change in the future. A strong education program for conducting in Australia can do much to change this situation.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Name: Luke Dollman  
Address: PO Box 13, McLaren Vale, SA 5171  
Occupation: Conductor  
Telephone: 0418 796 545

Project Description: To observe and study teaching practices of the world's leading orchestral conducting teachers.

Highlights of the project:

My 2013 Churchill Fellowship allowed me to travel to the Orkney Islands in the United Kingdom, the Tanglewood Music Festival in Massachusetts, USA, the Aspen Music Festival in Colorado, USA, the Medomak Conductor's Retreat in Maine, USA, and the International Conducting Workshop Festival in Zlin, Czech Republic.

I met many people of great interest during the course of my travels. Of particular importance were Martyn Brabbins and Charles Peebles in Orkney, Stefan Asbury and Ellen Highstein in Tanglewood, Robert Spano, Hugh Wolff and Asadour Santourian in Aspen, Kenneth Kiesler and Jerry Shcweibert in Medomak, and Larry Rachleff and Donald Schleicher in Zlin.

Lessons and conclusions:

To have had the opportunity to observe the world's best teachers of my craft in a focused, intensive environment has been of enormous benefit to my own skills as a teacher. The pedagogy of conducting is in many ways still in its infancy, with identifiable schools of thought as to how conducting should be taught only emerging towards the end of the twentieth century. I have seen a wide variety of approaches from leading international teachers, and have been in the unique position of being able to compare and contrast these approaches within a short timeframe. I have been able to add many tools and approaches to my own teaching as a result, and now have a far greater understanding of the needs of conducting students, and am better able to tailor an approach that is specific to each student. Additionally, I feel I now have a deeper understanding of the art form itself.

I will be able to put my newly acquired knowledge to use as I am an active teacher of conducting in Australia. During the coming months I will teach conducting at the University of Adelaide, the University of Melbourne, for the masterclass program of Symphony Services International (formerly Symphony Australia), and for the Summer Program of Melbourne Youth Music.

It is vital that we develop and nurture the next generation of Australian conductors as best we can. Currently, the Chief Conductor positions of all six professional orchestras in Australia are held by Europeans and Americans. Having Australian representation at this level would have many flow-on benefits for the Australian classical music scene, and allow our orchestras to have closer ties to their local communities. We must strive to make sure that our classical music culture is interwoven with the rest of Australian society, and is not something that is simply imported en masse.

## PROGRAMME

June 14 – 25, Kirkwall, Orkney Islands, United Kingdom.

Guest of the **St Magnus International Festival**, observing the conducting program of Martyn Brabbins and Charles Peebles.

June 27 – 28, Lenox, Massachusetts, United States.

Guest of the **Tanglewood Music Center**. Interviews and discussions with Stefan Asbury, director of the Tanglewood conducting program, and Ellen Highstein, director of the Tanglewood Music Centre.

June 29 – July 1, Aspen, Colorado, United States.

Guest of the **Aspen Music Festival**, observing the teaching of Robert Spano, with additional discussions with Asadour Santourian, the festival administrator.

July 2 – 18, Washington, Maine, United States.

Guest at the **Medomak Conductor's Retreat**, observing the teaching of Kenneth Kiesler.

July 20 – 31, Zlin, Czech Republic.

Guest at **International Conductor's Workshop Festival**, Zlin, observing the teaching of Larry Rachleff and Donald Schleicher.

## DETAILED FELLOWSHIP DESCRIPTION

### St Magnus International Festival

My trip began with the long journey from Adelaide, Australia to the Orkney Islands, United Kingdom. The Orkney Islands lie to the north of the Scottish mainland and can be said to be unusually isolated. This sense of distance from 'civilisation' undoubtedly contributes much to the unique atmosphere that inhabits the Orkneys. The landscape is green, yet sparse, largely due to the high winds which are present during most of the year. The islands themselves are compact, with travel between them often being done by ferry. As a result, a view of the sea and windswept rolling hills is never far away, wherever you are on the islands. Added to this is the archaeological importance of the islands, with numerous sites (dating back 5,000 years or more) giving insights into the day to day lives of our ancestors.

Kirkwall, the largest town of the islands, is therefore an ideal place to hold an annual summer festival. After a few days here, one feels one can forget the routines of regular life, and focus entirely on the artistic endeavour at hand. The St Magnus Festival was founded by Sir Peter Maxwell Davies, who has been one of the United Kingdom's leading composers for several decades. Coincidentally, he also has strong ties to Australia, having been composer-in-residence at the University of Adelaide in the 1970s. Though Max, as he is known, is no longer involved in the day to day running of the festival, he remains involved and is often present for key events. The festival presents a wide program of music, with a BBC symphony orchestra being in residence every year, along with numerous chamber and folk ensembles. Education has also been a key aspect of the festival for many years, with conductor and composer development programs being a highlight.

The conducting course of the St Magnus Festival is run by British conductor, Martyn Brabbins. Somewhat unusually for a British conductor, Brabbins studied in the Soviet Union in the 1980s under the renowned conducting pedagogue, Ilya Musin. Musin had a unique, detailed approach to the art of teaching conducting, which he developed over his 67 years

as conducting professor at the Leningrad Conservatory of Music. Brabbins started the St Magnus course some fourteen years ago, with the idea of recreating, in concentrated form, his experiences with Musin in Leningrad. Eight students from around the world are selected to participate in the program every year from a large pool of applicants who are required to send both their CVs and video footage demonstrating their conducting abilities. One of the main challenges facing aspiring conductors and conducting teachers, is that students need *something* to conduct. Whereas a violinist can buy a violin and practise it at any time, the orchestra on which a conductor must practise, is not so readily available. At the 2014 St Magnus Festival, students had the privilege of working with the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra for two sessions towards the end of the program. This experience gave them a taste of what it means to stand in front of a professional orchestra, and what such an orchestra will demand of them. Prior to this, the students conducted an ensemble of two pianos. This is the formation preferred by the Russian system of educating conductors, and it was particularly interesting for me to see students and teachers working with this formation for such an extended period of time (about nine days). Working in this environment allows the teacher to stop regularly and do detailed work with the student, be it on technical or musical issues. When an orchestra is present the situation is different, as one does not wish to waste too much time talking (orchestras are expensive!). Two pianists can simulate an orchestra sufficiently for it to be of use, provided the pianists are of a very high calibre, as was the case in Orkney. Brabbins often insisted on making students do short passages repeatedly, telling them, 'This is your chance to practise'. A unique technical feature of the Musin school of conducting is the practice of 'doing circles' when other approaches would call for a more conventional beat pattern. This approach can help to achieve a strong sense of line and direction, and give the music an organic quality, if done correctly. It was fascinating for to see these and other Musin techniques being applied by someone who was a pupil of the great master. Though I have read Musin's books and watched his videos, he passed away in 1999, meaning this as close as I can get to seeing his approach being used 'in the field'.

Also present was British conductor Charles Peebles who acted as the second teacher, giving the students an alternate viewpoint and further advice when required. Peebles would often do one to one work with a student separately whilst Brabbins continued teaching the main class. This gave the course an added sense of depth and dramatically increased the amount of personal attention each student received.

At the end of the course, the students performed the works of composers who were participating in the festival's composition seminar with a small ensemble. This is a practice that is unique to conducting masterclasses worldwide, and is something that should be adopted elsewhere. The interaction of conductors and composers is of crucial importance to the future of our art, so including this when everybody is at a formative stage can only be a good thing. Finally, after eleven days of observing the program, and many hours of discussion with teachers and students over a pint of Scapa Special at the local pub, the time came to leave the rather mystical Orkney Islands and begin the journey to the United States, where I would spend the majority of my time.

### Tanglewood

The Tanglewood Music Festival is legendary in the classical music world, having been the summer home of the Boston Symphony since 1936. Situated on land donated to the orchestra in the Berkshires just west of Boston, the Festival is also renowned for its role in training young musicians, particularly conductors. The Festival runs for eight weeks through the summer, but unfortunately, a visit of only two days was practical in the context of my overall Fellowship schedule. Hence the focus of my visit was on meeting with key people and asking how and why they do things the way they do. I was fortunate to be able to spend a significant amount of time with Ellen Highstein, the Director of the Tanglewood Music Center, and Stefan Asbury, the director of the conducting program. Highstein provided fascinating insight in to the history of the festival and music school, and the various twists and turns the conducting program has taken over recent decades. TMC currently offers two

conducting fellowships for every summer, and these positions are amongst the most coveted in the world of conductor training. Each Fellow is given the opportunity to work with the TMC orchestra on a regular basis and to assist whichever guest conductor may be working with the orchestra. Additionally, the fellows participate in a public masterclass with a high level soloist and the TMC orchestra, led by Stefan Asbury. For the 2014 summer the soloist for this workshop was Emmanuel Ax, one of the world's leading pianists. The TMC also offers a seminar program to six young conductors who were not selected for the Fellowship. These conductors spend ten days at Tanglewood towards the end of the summer, working with small string ensemble on six of these days under the guidance of Asbury. This allows the students to get a taste of the Tanglewood experience, and also gives Asbury and his colleagues the chance to get to know these students better than an audition situation allows. Thus, the seminar can in some ways be seen as a stepping stone to the Fellowship program. This is in contrast to the way the seminar has been run historically, particularly in the eighties and nineties when figures such as Leonard Bernstein played an important role in the program. During this era, seminarians would be present for the whole summer, working mostly with two pianos. The emphasis of the program then lay as much on the seminar, as on Fellowship students. Andris Nelsons takes over as Music Director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra this year, and will therefore play an important role in the future direction of the festival. It will be fascinating to see what direction the conducting program takes over the coming years.

The Tanglewood program has historically been one of the most important summer programs for conductors. Though my visit was relatively brief, it was nevertheless a valuable opportunity to investigate what is offered there today. My next stop would take me to the festival which has become Tanglewood's main rival for students in the twenty-first century.

### Aspen Music Festival and School

Following a bus trip and two flights I arrived in Aspen, Colorado, home during the summer to the Aspen Music Festival and School. The conducting program of the school rose to prominence in 2000 when then Music Director David Zinman established the American Academy of Conducting at the festival. I myself was a student at this inaugural year of the program, so it was interesting to note that despite the passing of some fourteen years, the structures put in place by Zinman remain broadly the same. Twelve conducting students are invited to be Fellows of the school each summer, and work throughout the eight week program with the American Academy of Conducting Orchestra, presenting concerts on a weekly basis. This orchestra is comprised of talented students who are studying at the festival who are offered a fellowship (ie no tuition fees) in return for their playing in the orchestra. The course is led by the festival's Music Director Robert Spano who teaches alongside invited guests such as Hugh Wolff and Larry Rachleff.

The fact that the class is performing on a regular basis makes the Aspen program unique. This means that the students are rehearsing the orchestra with a clear goal in mind, as opposed to conducting a piece through and receiving general comments about their conducting, as is often the case in these masterclass situations. Rehearsing an orchestra is not always an easy task and is in many ways one of the most difficult aspects of the job of the conductor to learn. In essence, the students in Aspen are provided with an environment which is much closer to that they will encounter in the profession than is the norm. This is particularly useful to advanced students who may be on the cusp of embarking on professional careers. Not all orchestra sessions are dedicated to the weekly concerts, however. Some are devoted to repertoire reading sessions, where a more relaxed and flexible approach can be taken by the teachers of the course. This also allows a broader spectrum of pieces to be covered through the summer. Occasional sessions with two pianos are dedicated purely to technical issues and students also have score study sessions with invited guests who are working at the festival. The fact that the course is part of a much

larger music festival and school means that there is much for students to absorb when they do have free time. Students are encouraged to attend rehearsals of the main festival orchestra in particular. Robert Spano was particularly generous with his time, discussing his broader approach and philosophies with me at length. Though not announced publicly as yet, he has interesting ideas for the future, particularly in terms of trying to get more female conductors involved in the program, and in the profession in general. This is an important issue for our field, as currently, it seems that most women studying at the tertiary level do not see conducting as a potential future career path. This is something we need to change.

Following my three day re-acquaintance with the activities of the Aspen Music Festival and School, I travelled to Washington, Maine, via Houston, Washington DC, and Portland, Maine. Two days solid travelling!

### The Medomak Conductor's Retreat

The Medomak Conductor's Retreat is the brainchild of Kenneth Kiesler, who is Professor of Conducting at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Situated just outside of the small village of Washington in Maine, the retreat caters for around twenty-five to thirty-five conductors, and is an intensive experience focussed on what it is to be a conductor and the broad skillset that this profession demands. I was present for just over two weeks, nearly the entire duration of the course. This allowed me to gain a thorough understanding of Kiesler's teachings, and what Medomak stands for. The retreat is unique in the world of conductor training, in that the actual act of conducting is only one aspect of what is offered at Medomak. Equal emphasis is given to score study, aural training, leadership skills, and broader considerations of what the profession of conducting involves. This is in sharp contrast to other programs where often the entire course is devoted solely to conducting. Indeed, when Kiesler began Medomak, there was no conducting whatsoever, the entire course being devoted to these supporting elements. Medomak is, therefore, a rare

opportunity for aspiring professional conductors to develop these essential skills which too often are left to chance.

Whilst Kiesler does all of the conducting teaching himself and leads most sessions during the course, he also invites a series of guests to work with the students. In 2014 Joanna Chao lead the aural training program which involved students working with Joanna both in small groups and in one to one sessions, providing an immersive experience. Steven Whiting, a leading musicologist who specialises in music of the classical period, was also present for several days, delivering lectures on the music from that period that was being conducted. Of particular interest for me was the work of Jerry Schwiebert, a movement specialist from the University of Michigan and author of *Physical Expression and the Performing Artist*. Schwiebert is a stage director and also teaches acting in Ann Arbor at the University of Michigan. Many years ago he felt that his students would too often plateau at a certain level, and he began to search for answers as to why this was the case. He came to the conclusion that most students were not able to use their body effectively due to negative body tensions and habits, or a lack of awareness as to the full expressive possibilities of their bodies. Through research into the practices adopted by methods such as Alexander Technique, Feldenkrais and Rolfing, practices such as Tai Chi and yoga, and the learnings of the scientific community in the area of functional anatomy and physiology, Schwiebert has developed his own approach to assist students in finding a way to balance their bodies, and free themselves of unnecessary tensions so that they may fulfil their expressive potential. Whilst Schwiebert developed his method with actors primarily in mind, the potential applications for conductors, and indeed many other performing artists, are enormous. Orchestral musicians are incredibly sensitive to the body language of a conductor. Good general posture helps to create a convincing impression for the musicians, even before the music making has begun. Even more importantly, a body which is relaxed and functioning properly is able to better communicate expression and emotions. Whilst the face and the hands of the conductor are also key components of communicating these things, it has been demonstrated that we also communicate our feelings through our torso. This is very

important for conductor training, as the conveying of emotions has long been considered one of the hardest things to teach. Indeed, many have questioned whether this can be taught at all. Schwiebert's approach gives us a pathway to assist students to be the best communicators they can be, and to embody the music which they are conducting, a quality that is often associated with the world's leading conductors. These discoveries have already had a direct impact on my own conducting and teaching, and were a highlight of my Churchill Fellowship experience.

Kiesler has long integrated Schwiebert's ideas into his work. Students conduct a string quintet and piano on a daily basis under Kiesler's guidance, giving a chance to put skills they have learnt in other parts of the retreat in to practice. At the end of the program, a public concert is given with a professional orchestras consisting of local freelance musicians. All conducting sessions are recorded on video, with students expected to review them in their own time. Kiesler's approach to teaching conducting is highly structured, being based around a detailed technical system which students are expected to adopt. As they develop and become more advanced, more freedoms are given, and are given greater range to find their own modes of expression. Beginning students are encouraged to use a specific make of baton, and to hold the baton in a certain way. This then allows them to more readily to take on some of Kiesler's concepts, particularly his ideas relating to making contact with the sound.

The physical location of the retreat plays a large role in the overall atmosphere and feel of the experience. Given its geographical isolation it really is a retreat from conventional society for two and a half weeks, and a complete immersion in music and conducting. Everybody lives on site, staying in wooden cabins in the forest. A lake is nearby, providing opportunities for swimming and kayaking, and each day of the retreat ends with students gathering around a campfire and swapping stories. At the end of this time, you can't help but have bonded with future colleagues, many of whom will remain friends for life.

At the end of my time in Medomak I boarded a bus which took me to Boston Logan Airport, where I boarded a flight to Vienna, Austria. From there I took a train to Zlin in the Czech Republic for the final stop in my Fellowship.

### International Conductor's Workshop Festival

The International Conductor's Workshop Festival (ICWF) is organised by Benjamin Loeb of the United States and has offered masterclasses in different parts of the world over the past decade. Zlin has been a regular location for these masterclasses as it offers access to affordable accommodation for participants and a first class orchestra – the Bohuslav Martinu Philharmonic. The teachers for the 2014 edition of the ICWF were Larry Rachleff of Rice University and Donald Schleicher from the University of Illinois. Thirty-five conductors from around the world (though primarily from the US) descended on Zlin for this ten day masterclass.

The focus in Zlin was very much on the first-hand experience of conducting a quality, full-size, professional orchestra. Every day of the course consisted of two rehearsals of three to four hours duration. Most of these rehearsals were with the orchestra, though there was the occasional session with a small ensemble to give the orchestra some respite. Due to the large number of participants, conductors were only guaranteed a total of six, ten minute sessions with the full orchestra, with additional time with ensemble. To be honest, I was initially sceptical as to whether this would be enough time for students to make real progress. However, to my surprise, this was not the case, and the majority of participants improved noticeably over the ten day period. This was largely due to the quality of the teaching on offer. Larry Rachleff and Donald Schleicher are two of America's leading conducting teachers, and without doubt amongst the best in the world. For me, it was particularly interesting to see two leading teachers working in tandem, how they shared the workload, and how they combined their differing teaching styles. They were kind enough to allow me to join them at the official 'teacher's desk' at the back of the orchestra, so that I

could listen in to their discussion on how best to approach the challenges presented by each student. This was particularly interesting as there was vastly different levels of ability amongst the student group – from people who already had some professional experience to those who were essentially beginners. Rachleff has a rapid-fire, energetic, teaching style when the students are on the podium. I believe this energy was probably the key factor in the development the students were able to make in such a short timeframe. Schleicher, on the other hand, has a more sparing approach, giving students clear and concise instructions in just a few words. As it turned out, these styles complemented each other perfectly, giving students two distinct voices to learn from.

Another feature of the program was the camaraderie and support that was displayed amongst the participants. Ten days is not a long time for people to bond and with such a large group it is easy to imagine the student body dividing up in to various cliques. This did not happen, however, and the feeling of ‘everybody being in it together’ was another significant factor in the success of the course. Students remained engaged when others were conducting, and at the end of each session everyone would gather around the table of Rachleff and Schleicher for an extensive debriefing of the session, with detailed comments and guidance being given to each student that had worked with the orchestra. Thus, the program was an excellent example of effective group learning, where students absorbed lessons from others, as well as those aimed directly at them.

Following the final session of the course, I began my trip back to Australia, laden with two heavy notebooks full of thoughts and ideas on the art of teaching conducting. Much of what I have learnt has already had a direct impact on the way I teach. Other things, particularly in relation to broader structural issues in a course, I hope to be able to put into practice in the future.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Over the course of my fellowship I have observed a wide variety of approaches to the teaching of conducting, and have absorbed much from some of the leading teachers in the world. The primary aim of the fellowship was to increase my own teaching skills through observation, and I have no doubt that this has been achieved. Many of the things I have learnt have related to detailed technical aspects of the art of conducting, whilst others have been more about the broader sweep of a particular approach or philosophy. Particular highlights from the summer can be summarised as follows:

1. The Russian-based techniques used by Martyn Brabbins, and his approach to the pacing of his masterclass, which I very much appreciated.
2. The greater emphasis on rehearsal technique that was possible in Aspen due to the weekly concerts presented by the conductor's orchestra, and Robert Spano's approach to teaching how to rehearse.
3. My investigation of the conducting activities of the Tanglewood Music Festival, both now and historically.
4. The approach to body training of Jerry Schwiebert and the detailed, yet at the same time, holistic approach to conducting of Kenneth Kiesler.
5. The teaching methods of Larry Rachleff and Donald Schleicher, and the demonstration of how a large group of conductors can be successfully taught in a focussed, intensive environment.

I intend to disseminate the lessons I have learnt during the fellowship in two ways. Firstly, and most obviously, I am active as a teacher of conducting in Australia, teaching for the Universities of Melbourne and Adelaide, Symphony Services International, and Melbourne Youth Music. Since returning from my fellowship some weeks ago I have already led an intensive five day masterclass in Sydney, and was able to put much of what I had learnt into practice immediately. It is also my intention to disseminate my newly acquired knowledge through the production of journal articles and a book. One such article is already under consideration for publication by a leading international music journal, and my planning for the book I wish to write is well-advanced. Whilst there is a reasonable amount of literature in existence on the subject of conducting in general, little exists on the specific subject of how conducting should be taught, and discussing the various challenges the teacher of conducting faces. This is a gap I intend to fill, and I am aiming to have my text ready for publication in early 2015.

Historically, very little has been done to train conductors in Australia. Whilst over 120 institutions offer the chance to major in conducting at the postgraduate level in America, only institutions offer conducting in Australia at the present time. For the past eighteen years, Symphony Services International (formerly Symphony Australia) has run a highly effective series of masterclasses, giving aspiring conductors the opportunity to conduct professional orchestras under expert guidance. This is commendable, and we should be grateful for the money that Symphony Services has invested in this field. However, the offerings of Symphony Services would be even more effective were Australia tertiary music institutions to take the teaching of conducting more seriously, and this is something I will strive to achieve through my work in the sector. This is important, particularly as Australia has not seen an Australian artistic director since the passing of Stuart Challender in 1991. It is vital for the broader musical community that there are Australian voices involved in the leadership of our orchestras. Our musical culture should reflect what it is to be Australian and what is special about this country. We cannot expect to achieve this if our classical music culture merely mirrors what is done elsewhere. Hopefully, the next generation of Australian conductors will

be able to play a greater role in the shaping of our musical future than is the case today. I look forward to putting the lessons I have learnt through my Churchill Fellowship into practice when I am training them.