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SEVENTEENTH ERIC JOHNSTON LECTURE 2003

“Under the Stars in Tropical Vienna”

by Associate Professor Martin W B Jarvis, DSO Artistic Director

Before I begin my lecture on the Darwin Symphony Orchestra I would like to give full recognition to Eric Johnston’s great support of the Orchestra, both during and after his term as Administrator of the Northern Territory.

In my early days here, back in 1988, I remember well Eric referring to me in person as “the Svengalie of Orchestral Music” – I wasn’t sure exactly what he meant at the time and I’m still not really sure, either.

Suffice to say that I really appreciated his commitment to the establishment of a symphony orchestra for the NT.

We worked together last, on the 1994 20th anniversary commemoration of Cyclone Tracy. Eric wanted the opening concert to be held in the Town Hall ruins on the 5th of December!

I said, “what if it rains, Eric”, to which he replied, as one might expect, that he had a direct line to the Almighty and that if we decided to go ahead with that venue he could assure me that it would not rain!

The title of my lecture tonight, “Under the Stars in Tropical Vienna”, is the title also of the first outdoor performance given by the Darwin Symphony Orchestra in 1989.

I chose it because it is statement about the spirit of the Orchestra and its attitude to the outdoors for which it has now become renowned.

My talk tonight will, then, be in essentially two parts.

Firstly, I will give you a potted history of the DSO or more correctly the DSO’s predecessors, to 1988; the year I arrived at Darwin.

Then I will take you, in time, through the following two years to the end of August 1990 to the Katherine Gorge Concert – the event that put the DSO on the national and international map, so to speak.

The Darwin Symphony Orchestra has become, over the past decade or so, one of the most high profile orchestras in Australia. Certainly, within the context of an amateur or community orchestra it has a unique status and reputation both nationally and internationally.

For example, I recently looked the Darwin Symphony Orchestra up on a Google Search on the world-wide-web and discovered literally dozens of references to the Orchestra, from previous conductors and soloists, who have performed with the orchestra, to parliamentary documents referring to the DSO.

With its performances at remote locations such as Katherine Gorge, Nourlangie Rock, Glen Helen Gorge, Groote Eylandt and more recently at Kununurra, it has attracted the attention of
the music loving community of both the Northern Territory and Australia, and has won a special place in their hearts.

Indeed there have been many occasions when I have received letters, telephone calls or simply comments from people, literally in the street, expressing their appreciation of the Orchestra. It is quite common for people to tell me that they "love the DSO".

Because of its community nature, the DSO's history and development involves many individuals, very many of whom have contributed much beyond simply playing in the Orchestra. People such as Pat O'Leary, Ian Ament, Mary Wheaton, Trish Doyle, Ros Bracher, and, of course the inimitable, Adina Poole from the Darwin String Orchestra days to Claire Kilgariff, and Anita Green from the Darwin Chamber Orchestra days.

And indeed as you will see, many other individuals, such as Nan Giese, Chancellor of Charles Darwin University, who have freely given enormous amounts of their time and energy over the years, in many different ways in order to make the Darwin Symphony Orchestra what it is today.

So what I have say tonight is also a celebration of all those people who brought the Darwin Symphony Orchestra into existence.

Like a lot of things in life, the Darwin Symphony Orchestra didn't come about through some great planning exercise; but rather through the gradual process of natural development and the unintentional intertwining and connecting of various individuals, as my story will reveal.

From Adina Poole's playing of string duets in 1976 through on-off performances such as Jean Johnston's Messiah performance in 1977 that "needed some sort of an orchestra", there was, as Adina Poole put it "a growing need for more classical music in Darwin".

In the late 1970's a concert band was formed under the direction of Nora Miller. It comprised mainly wind players but string players also took part, simply for the joy of ensemble playing.

During this time, 1977-84, there was also a putsch, by prominent members of the Darwin community, for the establishment of a professional orchestra.

I have been told that Paul Everingham, the first Chief Minister of the Northern Territory, had a symphony orchestra high on his list of "wants" for the NT.

Daryl Manzie, the then Minister for Community Development led the initiative to find funding; and approaches were made both to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, and to the Federal Government, through the Australia Council's "Study of the Future Development of Orchestras in Australia"; but in both cases sadly to no avail.

It was, however, the arrival, in the early 1983, of Pat O'Leary, the wife of the then Chief Justice, which gave both the momentum and the all-important expertise essential for the development of the Darwin String Ensemble.

In the mean time Brown's Mart, the Community Arts Project, Directed by Ken Conway, also became involved. At the end of 1981 a Felix Meagher carried out a "Music Needs Survey" at Darwin and as a result of the report, funding was made available for the appointment of a Music Project Officer, a Bob Petchell.

From 1983, through Brown's Mart, a number of initiatives were developed and carried out, to enhance the level of music activity in the City of Darwin. For example, between the 22nd and the 29th of May 1983, string teacher and music educator Mitchel Brunsden was brought to Darwin at the request of the string teachers of the City.
Mitchel Brunsden was at that time the South Australian Education Departments Senior String Teacher.

He was to teach and give workshops to the string players and teachers.

It was “a tremendous success” as Adina Poole’s report to Browns Mart put it.

The success of the project led to a subsequent visit by Professor John Hopkins later that same year.

The concert, held at the “Octagon” at Nightcliff High School, presented at the end of the visit received considerable accolades.

As Bob Petchell put it in his report...”the concert was excellent and a real first for Darwin”.

John Hopkins returned the next year, 1984, to conduct another performance.

This time the orchestra performed for the first time under the name the Darwin Symphony Orchestra.

Ian Tuxworth, the Chief Minister at the time, wrote to all members of the Orchestra expressing his enjoyment and congratulating them for their effort.

On this occasion the Darwin Symphony Orchestra had been formed as a one-off project, drawing together the Darwin String Ensemble and wind players and percussionists.

From these combined efforts and events, the Darwin String Orchestra grew, replacing the Darwin String Ensemble.

On the 30th of August 1984 the Darwin String Orchestra gave its inaugural concert at the then Darwin Community College Theatre.

A relationship between the Darwin Chorale and the Darwin String Orchestra was forged almost immediately, and together they produced two performances, under the Direction of Dr Dean Patterson, of Bach’s St John Passion, on the 2nd and 3rd of April 1985 at Christ Church Cathedral.

In April, of the same year, Mark Dunbar took up a three month long position of Conductor-in-Residence at Brown’s Mart.

Once again a “Darwin Symphony Orchestra” of local musicians, comprising members of the Darwin City Brass Band, the Concert Band, the Darwin String Orchestra and the Darwin Youth Orchestra, was created for the purpose of giving a concert at Marrara in-door stadium on the 21st of June.

Also in1985, Paul Cathcart became the Musical Director of the Darwin String Orchestra.

Paul, a fine trumpet player and Head of Music at Dripstone High School, of course had an interest in wind music, which inevitably led to the drawing together of the wind and strings to form an ongoing orchestra called the Darwin Chamber Orchestra in 1986.

On the 3rd and 4th of May 1986, another “Darwin Symphony Orchestra” was created from the Darwin String Orchestra, other local musicians and a contingent of students from the Victorian College of the Arts for the “Soft” Opening of the Darwin Performing Arts Centre and again this was conducted by John Hopkins.

As part of the same “Soft” Opening of the Darwin Performing Arts Centre; the needs of the Darwin Chorale, under the direction of Dr Dean Patterson, for an orchestra for their performances of the HMS Pinafore, also acted as an additional catalyst to bring together the orchestral players.
Loose plans were made amongst the Chamber Orchestra members for the re-establishment of the Darwin Symphony Orchestra for the 1988 season.

The Darwin Community College

In 1983 in parallel with the orchestral development that was taking place, the Darwin Community College, which itself was about to undergo major changes into the Darwin Institute of Technology (DIT), was developing a Music Teaching Course under the guidance of Don Colgrave, the then Head of the School of Creative Arts.

The specific objective of this new course was to offer the Education Department's Part-Time Instructors (PTIs) in music, a means of formalising their qualifications; but other “studio” music teachers were encouraged to enrol.

However, as time went by there was an increasing awareness of the need for a string specialist as part of the program.

By coincidence in 1986 Brown’s Mart brought two young musicians to Darwin for a brief residency. One of those musicians was a string player named Fiona Morphett, a violinist turned double bass player.

As a direct result of Pat O’Leary’s “thumping” on the desk of Kevin Davis, the then Director of the newly established DIT, protesting the need for a resident string specialist, Fiona Morfatt was offered a one year contract at the DIT for the year of 1987.

Kevin Davis himself had become directly involved in music education when in the early 1980’s, as Deputy Secretary of the Education Department, he had initiated a review of the Department's instrumental music program.

In addition, because of his keen interest in developing an orchestra for Darwin, in 1984 he was invited to become a member of the “Steering Committee for the Darwin Music Ensemble”, which was attempting to seek funding for a 13 piece chamber ensemble.

The 13 pieces represent an instrumental performer from every section of an orchestra, that is 2 violins a viola, a cello, a double bass flute oboe clarinet bassoon, French horn trumpet trombone percussion.

The idea being that from this ensemble a full orchestra could be built. The Darwin Music Ensemble Project came to nothing, unfortunately.

Therefore, because of Kevin Davis’s predisposition to the idea of an orchestra for Darwin, it was not difficult for Pat O’Leary to persuade him to allocate the DIT funds needed to create the position.

The String Specialist position proved to be a great success and this led to a decision to employ a string specialist for longer term. And duly a three-year contract was advertised nationally in August of the same year, that is to say 1987.

In July of 1987 my family and I had returned to Perth after spending 4 years in the UK. I saw the advert and duly applied for the post.

I had always wanted to visit Darwin and was thrilled to hear after a few weeks that I had been short listed for the position.

A few weeks later I flew to Darwin for the interview. I was immediately enchanted by Darwin and delighted by the news, which I received some weeks later, that I had been appointed to the position.
I moved to Darwin in February 1988 as a Lecturer at the then Darwin Institute of Technology (DIT) with the brief to teach “strings” (at the time that included, violin, viola, cello, double bass and guitar!) and with the additional brief to build an orchestra for the Darwin community.

Whilst still in Perth I had been approached by both the Darwin Chamber Orchestra (DCO) and the Darwin Youth Music Association who ran the Darwin Youth Orchestra, to ask if I would be prepared to conduct and artistically direct them, which I was more that happy to do.

On my arrival I discovered that the Darwin Chamber Orchestra was a group of about 20 players, who rehearsed, on Monday evenings, at the DIT music facilities, which at that time was a reasonably large demountable, known affectionately as D17.

The Chamber Orchestra gave concerts every once in a while, when it was felt a program was ready for performance.

Shortly after my arrival I requested a meeting with Kevin Davis, whom I had not yet met. He took me to lunch at Questers Restaurant, the DIT catering student’s restaurant.

My purpose, in calling for the meeting, was to discuss my strategy to achieve the goals.

Kevin had thought, he told me later, that I wanted to “complain about the work load”, so he was surprised and somewhat pleased that this was not the case and therefore took the opportunity to tell me what he expected from the position, to inform me of his full support and to let me know that anything I wanted I was “to go straight to him”.

We gave our first concert together in March of that year in the ballroom of the Beaufort Hotel. The program was:

- Overture Bastian and Bastienne - Mozart
- Concerto for Bassoon with soloist Lelo Braun - Stamitz
- Symphony no. 104 - Haydn

The concert was well received and there was a deal of excitement amongst the Orchestra regarding the level of performance attained.

The Administrator of the Northern Territory Commodore Eric Johnston wrote the following week to Ros Bracher, the Chairman of the Chamber Orchestra and one of the violinists in the Orchestra to thank her for inviting him to attend the concert.

**A new image**
At the time of my arrival as the new Artistic Director of the Darwin Chamber Orchestra, the management committee of the Orchestra had taken a very low-key approach to promoting the concerts.

Posters were often hand drawn and photocopied, likewise the banner, advertising the concerts, was hand painted.

This needed to change, in my view, if we were to convince our audience that Darwin now had an orchestra, which it should take seriously.

Following the March performance, rehearsals immediately began for the next concert.

In order to capture the imagination of the public I chose the title “Mostly Mozart”.

The Darwin Performing Arts Centre was the choice of venue. The Darwin Chamber Orchestra had never performed there and it was important for the change of image to use a “proper” venue.

Along side this went the decision for the orchestra to wear different concert cloths; men were to wear white tuxedos with black bow ties and the women were to wear long black dresses.
The final touch was to have offset printed all the posters and programs. The question was who would pay for this.

As it happened one of the violinists in the orchestra, Roger Simms lecturer in Journalism at the DIT knew or had met Mick Stumbles of TIO.

Roger arranged a meeting between Mick, himself and me to discuss possible sponsorship. We asked Mick to cover the cost of providing the Chamber Orchestra with printed posters and programs, which he enthusiastically agreed to do – TIO was the first sponsor of the Orchestra and remains one of our sponsors today.

As a preparation for this all-important concert, it was felt that the orchestral players needed an informal environment to test out their skills. So a performance was organised to take place at the Palmerston Shopping Centre one Saturday morning.

The NT News picked up on the story of the forthcoming performance at the shopping centre and a photo was taken of one the French-horn players, Kevin Radford, at sunset to promote the concert.

The photo appeared on the front page of the NT News and went on to win a journalistic award.

Great excitement surrounded the final preparations for the Orchestra’s first “real” performance.

For this premier event, in choosing “Mostly Mozart” as the theme, I had deliberately chosen an attractive program of Mozart’s most popular repertoire.

We opened the concert with the Overture to the Marriage of Figaro, Claire Marriott (née Kilgariff) played the solo in the Flute Concerto in G and we finished the concert with the Symphony No 40 in G minor.

The concert was a great success; we were on our way!

During the rest of the year the Orchestra gave two additional performances at the Darwin Performing Arts Centre, the Orchestra’s first Viennese Night in October and “Christmas with the Chorale” in late November.

Besides the obligatory Strauss Waltzes etc the Viennese concert featured Beethoven’s Symphony No 1 in C.

The performance was very enthusiastically received and led to a number of people writing to the NT News to congratulate all those involved.

Chris Hewer in his letter to the NT News said, “...As a Darwin resident of 21 years I watched hungrily as this blossoming orchestra made history - a Beethoven Symphony and the Strauss Family in Darwin!”...

Shell and the Darwin Symphony Orchestra, the start of a long-term relationship
Rehearsal space was proving to be more than a little bit of a problem at our “home” on the Darwin Institute of Technology’s campus at Casuarina.

At the time we were using the Performance Studio in the Music Department facility D17, a demountable.

With the increase in the size of the Orchestra from 20 to over 50 we had, by the end of 1988, outgrown the room.
As good fortune would have it, one of the cellists in the Orchestra, Wayne Schumacher, was employed by the Shell Company.

He suggested that we make an approach to the Shell Company through Garry Swan, the Chairman's Representative, at Darwin.

Luckily for the Orchestra Garry and his wife Tracey had been at the “Christmas with Chorale” concert and Garry was very enthusiastic and impressed by the Orchestra.

So, when I made an approach to Garry to ask for assistance with the payment of rehearsal costs for the Orchestra to use the Darwin Performing Arts Centre the response was an immediate “yes!”

This meant that the 1989 Season’s rehearsals could be held on stage in the Playhouse Theatre at the Darwin Performing Arts Centre. This had a number of positive benefits for the Orchestra.

Firstly, it gave the Orchestra a sense of “professionalism” in that they were now the resident orchestra at the Darwin Performing Arts Centre a “proper” venue.

Secondly, it meant that performing at the venue was easier simply because all rehearsals were taking place where the concerts were to held - a real artistic plus.

Thirdly, it increased the social interaction between the players, as a large number of the musicians would congregate at the “Brasserie” of the Beaufort Hotel for coffee etc after each rehearsal.

A New Name Is Needed

The expansion of the Darwin Chamber Orchestra to well over 50 players meant that its name was no longer appropriate. A chamber Orchestra normally has a maximum playing strength of around 30 musicians.

On the agenda at a meeting of the Management Committee held at in Ros Bracher’s office at Paspley Pearling late in 1989 the matter of an appropriate new name was discussed.

Suggestions included The Symphony Orchestra of the Northern Territory, The Symphony Orchestra of the North, The Northern Territory Symphony Orchestra and, of course, the chosen name The Darwin Symphony Orchestra.

The Orchestra’s first concert under its new name was “Basically Beethoven” held on the first Saturday of June 1989.

The Program was the Overture to Fidelio, the Romance in F, the Finale of The Creatures of Prometheus and the mighty Fifth Symphony.

The Orchestra performed well, though there were moments in the Overture that might have been better, but this was a young orchestra, after all, making its first efforts at becoming a symphony orchestra.

As Peter Bonner, the NT News reviewer described in his review the following week, “After interval the DSO hit its finest hour for the irresistible Fifth Symphony...1,000 pairs of hands applauded for more”.

The Friends of the DSO (FODSO) is established

Following the success of the Beethoven concert a number of enthusiastic individuals got together under the leadership of Yvonne Forrest and Jim Eedle and decided to form a “friends” support group.
The Friends of the Darwin Symphony Orchestra was duly established at a meeting held at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory and formalised within a few weeks of the “Basically Beethoven” performance.

August 1989 "Under the Stars in Tropical Vienna" - The DSO outdoors for the first time
In order to ride the wave of the success of the DSO’s first concert, it appeared to me that it was important for the DSO to embrace the outdoor life style of the Top End and for us to give a performance outdoors at the Amphitheatre, in the Botanic Gardens.

The choice of program was important as we wished attract as many as possible to this event, particularly those who had not been to a symphony orchestra concert previously. The music of Johann Strauss fitted the bill perfectly.

So, on the 18th of August 1989 the DSO gave its first outdoor performance. Titled "Under the Stars in Tropical Vienna", the concert was duly held at the Amphitheatre in the Botanic Gardens.

It was a very cold Dry Season night, but about 2,000 people turned out to listen to and dance to the music of Strauss.

It was the first time, but by no means the last, I was to hear the words "on ya Martin" from Maggie Sydenham, the then Director of the NT Government's Office of the Arts and Cultural Affairs, as she was spinning around on the dance floor immediately in front of the Orchestra.

We had offered Lila Notley's group, the Top End Life Association, the opportunity to sell food to the audience.

However, due to a misjudgement of the numbers that would attend on their part, they had sold out of hot chicken by 7.30 pm. They immediately sent out for more chicken from Kentucky Fried Chicken, but unfortunately for them the chicken did not arrive until after the interval!

To add insult to injury, so to speak, because the refreshment vans were being powered by a rather noisy small generator that could only run before the concert and during interval, there was no power to keep the chicken hot nor light for the audience to see that hot chicken, which, I might add, would have been most welcome on such a cold night, was now available.

However, the chicken did not go to waste as it was consumed at the end of the Concert by sixty or so hungry musicians who welcomed the fried chicken as an appropriate accompaniment to their glass or two of champagne.

Kangaroo 1989 The DSO's Relationship with the Military Musicians
Gary Swan, the Chairman's Representative of the Shell Company, was also enthralled with the performance at the Amphitheatre, as was his guest Brigadier Ian Bryant, Officer Commanding NORCOM.

As a result the DSO was invited to perform as part of the Military Tattoo to be held in October that year to celebrate the end of Kangaroo '89.

The idea was to use the DSO as part of the night's entertainment and then combine forces with the Military Band for a performance of the 1812 Overture by Tchaikovsky to finish the night with well over 140 musicians on stage.

At first this idea did not go down very well at all with the Military personnel. But in fairness to them, the Beating Retreat and associated 1812 etc is a special military occasion and understandably they objected to a non-military orchestra and its long haired conductor muscling in on their territory, quite literally in this case as the performance was to take place at Larrakeyah Barracks.
In the end, however all went off well and the two performances on Friday and Saturday were a great success and over 10,000 people attended.

The Katherine Gorge Concert - the DSO goes international
In 1989 I was approached by the Katherine Arts Council to send some musicians to their Arts Festival. Claire Kilgarriff (flute) and Stephan Bulmer (guitar) and Penny Lonsdale (cello) duly went to perform. In the event they played on the shores of the Katherine River a little way up the Gorge. The evening was a great success.

The Idea
On their return to Darwin, Claire suggested to me that a concert of the full DSO up the gorge would be a great idea.

As a result of this Gary Swan, Diana Jarvis, the DSO’s Project Manager, and I went to see the Gorge with Tracy Johnson from the Katherine Arts Council and David West from the NT Conservation Commission. Also in attendance was Neil Croft from Travel North, the company that ran the Gorge cruises at the time.

A site was chosen at the top of the first Gorge about 3.5 kilometres up the River. My vision was that the Orchestra would be on a floating pontoon with audience on the cliffs overlooking the river and the Orchestra.

The Planning, the Army gets involved
The easy part was over. The planning now began in earnest.

When we returned to Darwin I made contact with Brigadier Bryant to ask if it would possible for his engineers to build a platform or pontoon that could be floated up the Gorge. Brigadier Bryant greeted the idea with great enthusiasm, though also with a little trepidation.

After sometime, I was invited to meet Captain Ted Synock and Warrant Officer Geoff Forsyth of the 7th Military District corps of engineers to discuss the proposal.

Geoff told me, several years later, that he had wondered at the time what he and his troops were getting involved in when they met “this long haired…..”!

Anyway, Captain Synock and WO Forsyth made some enquiries and in due course got back to me to tell me that building a pontoon would be impossible.

However, they had discovered a piece of equipment that might do the job - an air portable bridge unit, two in fact, unfortunately these pieces of equipment were in Canberra. So, Operation "Sapper Symphony", as it was known to the military, got underway to bring these bridge units to the NT under the guise of a much needed full military exercise.

Having established that it would be technically possible to "float" the Orchestra we then sought and received permission from the traditional owners, who were very enthusiastic about the venture.

Burrundi Pictures
Quite early in the planning stages, Steven Johnson of Burrundi Pictures approached me.

Steven was very keen to film the Concert and came to me to seek permission. He had a very grandiose plan to "shoot the whole thing on film" rather than video. He was also very excited about the concept.

Burrundi Pictures had been commissioned by the NT Government to film a documentary profiling artistic/cultural activities around the Territory. The DSO Concert would therefore fit well into this project.
As an aside to the filming of the Bolero in the Gorge, one of the companies Steven Johnson had sought financial assistance from, the Beyond International Group, who at one point had suggested that they might be interested in a live global telecast of the Concert.

This had come about as result of a request by a number of internationally famous individuals, "dedicated to the environment", and led by Olivia Newton-John, who wished to attend the Concert.

I was contacted by a John Wells of the LOE entertainment group regarding the possibility of these "Glitterati" launching the Australian Chapter of "Earth Communications Office" or ECHO at the Bolero Concert. There was indeed great excitement for a while about the possibility of such collection of assorted Hollywood stars and multi-media personalities attending the event. However, in the end they didn't come. As the David Rosenthal of the news NT News put it:

"Rumour had it Robert Redford, Dudley Moore, Olivia Newton-John, Jack Thompson and any number of big names were to attend the classical gig in the Gorge.

Well none of it's true. The rumours were finally and mercifully, killed this week by the "organiser" of the all-star visitation, a Mr John Wells..."

And of course Colin Wicking had to have a say!

Whilst on the subject of publicity and similar things, following the press release announcing that the concert was to take place I was contacted by the late Andrew Ollie on Sydney Drive-Time to talk live on air about the event.

He was most amused by the idea that there was a symphony orchestra in Darwin and said "We are all used to hearing about Beer Can Regattas and Mud Crab wrestling in Darwin but a symphony orchestra from Darwin, surely this is a publicity stunt!"

When I pointed out that Darwin was a very cultured place indeed and that in my estimation it would become the cultural capital of Australia within five years he burst out laughing and asked me to "say that again" which I did!
Interestingly, when the Australian Bureau of Statistics announced, in 1992, their latest statistics on the consumption of the arts per capita in Australia's capital cities Darwin was overall in second place after Canberra - Sydney was bottom of the list!

A Rehearsal with Army

In order to make sure that the idea of floating the DSO on two Air-portable Bridge (C116) Units was actually workable, it was essential that we could "try it out" well in advance of the day of the concert. Unfortunately, due to organisational difficulties it was not possible to have rehearsal until quite late in the preparations.

To facilitate this on Sunday the 12th August 1990 the Orchestra made its way to Lake Bennett, South of Darwin, for a "rehearsal".

The "pontoons", as they were referred to, were actually Air-portable Bridge units used for creating temporary bridges in a zone of conflict. They were driven by four very large out-board motors and steered by four soldiers who were themselves directed by a soldier positioned in the middle of the unit; directions being given by a whistle and hand signals. The "pontoons" are very manoeuvrable and quite fast.

The pontoons had been set up with all the equipment, rostra, chairs, music stands etc, in place, so that we could be sure that every would fit.

The configuration was to be strings on one pontoon, wind and percussion on the other.

The pontoons were to be set in "V" shape with the conductor's podium mounted on a small boat that would be moored between in the opening of the "V".

All this had to be tested.

So, rather like astronauts in preparation for the first Moon landing, all had to be tried in different location first.

In due course the pontoons set out on to the lake, and carried out quite a number of manoeuvres, crisscrossing the lake quite a number of times.

Steven Johnson and some of his crew were also present to record some of the preparations for his film, and to practice some of camera positions.

By the end of the "rehearsal" everyone was satisfied that the idea was indeed workable.

It would be interesting to know what we have done had the idea not worked!

As a final musical preparation we gave a concert on the 18th of August at the Darwin Performing Arts Centre to rehearse our program.

The Day Arrives

At 6 am on August the 25th two coaches departed for Katherine. One coach had picked up DSO players from the Darwin Performing Arts Centre, the other from outside the Northern Territory University School of Music, Demountable 17 at the Casuarina Campus.

On arrival at the Gorge the players immediately made their way down the boat ramp and onto the "pontoons" ready for the "dress" rehearsal.

The pontoons were unmoored and moved slowly out into the middle of the Katherine River, and as we slowly made our way up the Gorge there was an air of great excitement and expectation among the players.

The trip up the Gorge took about 25 minutes. When we arrived at the Concert site the pontoons were moored and a small rowing boat with the conductor's podium on it was fixed in the centre between the two pontoons.
We rehearsed as much as we able to in the searing heat of the late-morning then returned to the boat ramp.

Meanwhile, the audience, which had been arriving since late morning, were being ferried up to the top of the first Gorge. Travel North was able to supply 4 boats of varying seating capacities (135,65,65 & 44).

Each boat had to complete 3 round trips with the large boat doing 4. This gave a total seating capacity of 1,062.

The first boat departed at 1.30pm, and the last departure time was 3.30pm.

In order to keep those who were on the first boats entertained whilst waiting for the performance to take place a variety of street theatre type performances were organised by the Katherine Arts Council under the direction of Neil Cameron and Wendy Fahey.

These performances took place from 2.00pm onwards with the final pre-concert entertainment from 4.00pm - 4.30pm presented by the Barunga/Beswick Dancers, traditional dancers and musicians. Some light refreshments were also available, but no alcohol was on sale.

Groups such as the NT University party, who were using the event to entertain potential sponsors of the NTU and special guests had organised their own food and drinks.

Others simply sat on the rocks soaking up the ambience and waiting with ever increasing expectation.

As Abi Thoneman put it in the NT News. "The feeling that history was being made was in the air".

The Orchestra and I waited at the pre-concert mooring site for what seemed to be hours, but was only in fact about 35 minutes. Eventually the signal was given by Diana for the pontoons to move into position.

The two pontoons then moved to mid-stream, leaving me on the bank, and made their way to the Concert site.

As they appeared from around the bend in sight of the audience there was a great cheer.

The Army personnel went about their job mooring the pontoons and the small rowing boat, much to the fascination of the audience.

In due course the job was complete and all the soldiers stood to attention signifying that they had finished.

Again there was cheer from the crowd.

Whilst all this was going on I was sitting, just out of sight of the audience, in a "rubber ducky" with two soldiers assigned to the task of taking me to the podium.

On the given signal, just as the soldiers on the pontoons had departed, one of the two soldiers started the engine and we roared around the bend and into THE full sight of the crowd.

Immediately there was a huge cheer and the audience all stood up. I was sitting on a chair at the front of the "Rubber Ducky" holding a rope wearing tails and a life jacket!

We did the Rubber Duckie equivalent of a wheelie and then I stepped onto the rowing boat.

A year of planning was about to come to fruition.
The Concert was a very interesting experience.

To start with the Sun was not where it was expected to be.

It was in fact shining more or less straight down the line of the Gorge and into the eyes of the string players.

This meant that every time they looked up at me they were, at least for the first part of the Concert, blinded by the brilliance of the light shining straight behind my head.

The wind and percussion sections, on the opposite pontoon, had quite a different problem.

There was an unexpected prevailing breeze blowing into the faces of the wind players making it very difficult for the wind players to play.

This also meant that the sound from the strings was being blown towards the wind but the wind players own sound was being blown away from the strings.

All this made the start of the Concert feel rather difficult.

Not that this had a particularly detrimental effect on the performance as far as the audience was concerned.

As Dr June Kaine observed in her NT News review of the event, when she alluded to those problems that I had mentioned to her after the concert "…As a result, they could hardly have imagined how wonderful they sounded from where we sat on the cliff face".

As the time passed, the sunset and the breeze dropped. Everything became very still and quite magical.

The light now reflecting off the red cliff walls of the Gorge onto the Katherine River turned the water to the colour gold and to all intents and purposes it was as if we were floating on liquid gold.

The music resonated off the Gorge walls, as it might have done had we been performing in a giant cathedral.

After we had played Ravel’s Bolero the whole audience stood up clapped and cheered. We finished with an encore from Coppelia, the Prelude and Mazurka. Again the audience clapped, cheered and called for more, but this time we could not respond.

Time was now not on our side, we had to leave.

I very carefully climbed down into the Rubber Duckie, which had pulled up along side the rowing boat again, with my baton clenched between my teeth in order to free my hands.

Clive Hyde, Chief Photographer of the NT News, told me later, that, as I stepped into the little rubber boat, he had had his camera firmly focused on me so that, as he put it, "if you were going into the water, I was going to have the shot!"

Once again the outboard motor roared and I sped away, around the bend and out of sight of a cheering crowd.

Once again the Army moved onto the pontoons and in a very short space of time the Orchestra was sailing away to the tumultuous cheer of a delighted audience.

Abi Thoneman wrote later in her NT News report. "Many were left spellbound by the experience."
On the Monday following the concert virtually all of the first 3 pages of the NT News were given over to reports and photos of the concert. I was told that this was unique in the paper’s history.

The following year the Darwin Symphony Orchestra won a Brolga award for Bolero in the Gorge, and Burrundi Pictures won a national award for the film "Nitmiluk Mujik - a celebration of life" which features the concert.

Thank you