

Orchestral dreams

Sydney-born Russell Ger has been building his reputation as an orchestra conductor in New York, but his latest accolade is a prestigious Australian award. Danny Gocs reports.



Conductor Russell Ger at a New York concert.

CONDUCTOR and musical director Russell Ger has been living in the United States for the past six years, but Australia is still very much in his dreams.

The former Moriah College student and music director at Sydney's Central Synagogue from 2001-08 is currently music director of New York's Park East Synagogue where he works with acclaimed cantor Yitzchak Meir Helfgot.

Ger, 33, was back home in June as a guest of the Australian Jewish Choral Festival at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, which brought together singers from around the country to learn about music with rich Jewish traditions.

By coincidence, it was around this time that the judges of the annual Brian Stacey Memorial Trust Award for emerging Australian conductors had selected Ger for the 2014 prize.

"I knew about the award, but the announcement was not until mid-July, by which time I was back in New York," says Ger by phone from New York this week.

"I wrote an acceptance speech which was read at the ceremony by a friend. I'm very excited to get the award.

"There are not that many Australian conductors my age, so it was very gratifying this year to be announced as the winner."

The award is in honour of talented musical director Brian Stacey, who was killed in a motorcycle accident in Melbourne in 1996, the night before the premiere of the musical *Sunset Boulevard*.

Ger says an important aspect of the application for the award, which carries prize money of \$8000, was to provide a vision statement.

"I wrote that many American orchestras are doing interesting things to try and change the model of the traditional classical orchestral concert to make it more relevant, accessible and inviting.

"Living in New York I am lucky to have access to so many of the world's great orchestras. When I go to the Met or

Carnegie Hall, they are usually full, but that is unique and in many cities the orchestras are doing it tough because they have lost relevancy.

"With so much to consume our attention these days, we in the classical world have to somehow modernise what we are doing."

It was in Year 11 at Moriah College that Ger first became interested in conducting. His music teacher suggested that he attend the summer music camp where conducting was being offered for the first time.

"At first I was not interested, but decided to give it a try. It was challenging and I thought it could be rewarding," he recalls.

"Once I got a glimpse of conducting I was fascinated and drawn to it – it seemed that I was born to it."

Russell Ger, Conductor

"My piano skills had never been developed – my mother was a trained classical pianist but died when I was 11, and my dad knew nothing about music.

"Once I got a glimpse of conducting I was fascinated and drawn to it – it seemed that I was born to it."

He studied music at the University of New South Wales and worked with Australia's top orchestras, gaining valuable conducting experience.

After Ger left Australia in 2008, he lived in Boston for three years where he studied for his Masters of Music degree at the Boston Conservatorium.

"While there I was contacted by Cantor Helfgot – we had worked together at a concert at Central shul in Sydney in 2005 – and he invited me to audition for the position of music director at Park East Synagogue in New York.

In April 2011 Ger moved to New York and took up the part-time salaried position at the Park East Synagogue, which allowed

him to continue his orchestral career.

"At Central shul I conducted every Friday night and Saturday morning and holy days for seven years, so I was an integral part of the synagogue. Here we don't do Friday nights and I conduct for two Saturdays a month and some holy days, so I am not as involved in the life of the synagogue as at Central.

"However, the quality of the music-making is superlative. I have the cream of the crop of New York professional choral singers who regularly perform with the New York Philharmonic and the chorus of The Met.

"And Yitzchak Meir Helfgot is in a class of his own. We do a lot of major compositions and repertoires – there is nothing beyond the skill level of the group and that is really exciting."

Asked if there are many positions for conductors available, he says: "That's the reason that I live in the United States – there are infinitely more opportunities here than in Australia. Conductors tend to stay with orchestras for a long time and they guard those positions zealously."

Last month Ger performed at the Ravinia summer music festival in Chicago with Cantor Helfgot and acclaimed Israeli-born American violinist Itzhak Perlman, who received a

Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award in 2008 for his music.

"It is an enormous festival that runs for a couple of months during summer and features top stars from around the world, not just in classical music but also pop and country music," he says.

"The night that we performed there were about 3000 people in the audience."

Ger has toured America with Perlman, promoting a recording of Jewish art music. Performances took place at the Hollywood Bowl with members of the Los Angeles Philharmonic before an audience of 10,000 and at the Barclays Centre arena in New York before an audience of 6000 people.

"I pinch myself when I am on stage with Itzhak because it is so surreal. I never would have thought that in my lifetime I would get to work so closely with someone of his calibre."

Ger plans to return home to Australia later this year to catch up with family and friends.

"Professionally there is nothing I would love more than to be able to work with the Melbourne Symphony or the Sydney Symphony – all the Australian orchestras are wonderful. If they decided to take a gamble and give me a debut, I would be there in a heartbeat."



Russell Ger conducts cantor Yitzchak Meir Helfgot (left) and violinist Itzhak Perlman at last month's Ravinia summer music festival in Chicago.