

Obituary: Robert Schulz

Robert Schulz (1950-2025)



Robert Schulz, the founder and conductor of the West Australian Mandolin Orchestra, passed away suddenly at the age of 74 years in September last year. Robert was a mandolin & guitar teacher and a gifted composer whose music was widely performed in Australia, Japan, Europe, and the UK.

Robert trained as a music teacher at the Fremantle Music School in Western Australia and became an owner of the school in 1974. The school was founded by Harry and Toni Baker (Bakkerus), immigrants from The Netherlands who had been music teachers there. They taught Robert a comprehensive approach to teaching music which included end-of-term concerts and ensemble playing for all the students, with teachers expected to conduct, arrange music and be able to perform on a number of instruments. Robert ran the music school until the mid-1990s, then taught briefly in schools after completing a Bachelor of Music Education in 1998 before returning to private teaching, where he always had a full roster of students.

**“Robert’s music was eagerly sought-after
by mandolin orchestras”**

The formation of FAME

Robert founded the West Australian Mandolin Orchestra in 1976 and in 1979 he took the orchestra to Bendigo in Victoria for the Summer Mandolin Music Camp organised by the Melbourne Mandolin Orchestra. It was at this camp that the Federation of Australasian Mandolin Ensembles (FAME) was formed, an organisation similar to the BMG Federation in the UK. The West Australian orchestra performed Robert’s composition called *Folk Dances 1&2*, the first Schulz composition to be performed at a national level. It was later published by Trekel, a German music publisher, and was widely performed in Europe. This was the start of Robert’s career as a composer.

Robert wrote some beautiful music in the 1980s that established his reputation. He had a skill for melody which came to the fore in pieces such as *Outback*, *Gungaia* and *Botany Suite*, which, like all Robert’s music, was eagerly sought-after by mandolin orchestras hungry for new music written specifically for their instruments.

The 1990s were increasingly productive times for Robert, writing pieces such as *Carnival and Procession*. Compositions of his were premiered at the Melbourne International Mandolin Festival in 1993 and the Perth International Mandolin Festival in 1997, a hugely successful event which saw full orchestras attending from Germany, Japan, New Zealand, and the Eastern States.

Robert never stopped composing. One of the standouts was *Sonata for Violin and Orchestra* in 2004 which the FAME orchestra premiered in Melbourne.

In 2006 he wrote *Symphony of Seasons*, which was premiered in Japan by the Takarazuka Mandolin Guitar Orchestra, which Robert was invited to conduct.

Robert also wrote many solo, duet and small ensemble works for mandolin and guitar. These were often written for talented players such as Marissa Carrol (mandolin), Joel Woods (guitar), Marco Ludemann (mandolin), Kurt Jensen (mandolin) and Tove Flensburg (mandolin) and included many lighter pieces written for his wife Marie on her birthdays. A good example of the smaller ensemble pieces is *Divertimento for Two Mandolins and Guitar*, which can be seen on YouTube with Robert performing on guitar.

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Robert's contribution to the development of the mandolin movement in Australia has been significant. Since its inauguration FAME has held an annual music camp/festival and on many occasions Robert was chosen as conductor of the FAME festival orchestra and would write music to be premiered at these events. He led the overseas tour of an Australian Mandolin Orchestra to Europe in 2006 and the West Australian Mandolin Orchestra in 2010 as conductor and musical director. These were highlights in Robert's career and they confirmed his reputation there, with the Estrellita Mandolin Orchestra in The Netherlands surprising him by performing an entire programme of his music.

"Robert found a calling in life to teach and promote music in the community"

Robert's music is mostly self-published via his website www.robertschulz.net, but some of his early works were published by Trekel in Germany and a beginner's tutor for younger students of the mandolin was published by Astute Music in the UK. He wrote over one hundred works for mandolin orchestra as well as many solos, duos, trios and quartets for mandolin and guitar. A dedicated teacher, he also wrote a mandolin tutor for adult students and two classical guitar tutors which have been widely used in Australia.

Next year is the West Australian Mandolin Orchestra's 50th anniversary. It is sad that Robert will not be there to mark the half-century, however, Robert has left us his final piece *Five Decades – Five Moods*, which he had already written for the event. It will be a very special concert.

Robert found a calling in life to teach and promote music in the community, which he was able to fully develop and practice due to his natural talent, warm personality, and sense of humour. He never sought material wealth, but his life was rich in many other ways. He had a profound effect on many of his students and orchestra members, giving them a part to play and an experience in music that they, as ordinary members of the community, would never have experienced without him. In addition, he has left the wider community the legacy of his work as a composer.

The FAME music festival in Melbourne in January 2026 was dedicated to his memory.

Geoffrey Barber
West Australian Mandolin Orchestra

Folk Dances 1&2 on YouTube

A performance of *Folk Dances 1&2* by the UK's Fretful Federation can be seen on YouTube (search "Fretful Federation, Schulz").



Recollections of Charles Skinner

Janet Ambrose has been a very long-term and most stalwart member of the BMG Federation. She phoned me following a recent article in the BMG Federation Newsletter about Charles Skinner.

In her early years as a mandolinist, she had lessons from Charles at his shop. She mused that the shop cannot have been all that successful as she rarely remembered the lesson being interrupted for customers! She recalls with gratitude his reconstructing her tremolo, as that has stood her in very good stead over many years.

She explained that Charles was very keen to support all the clubs and visited them in his car over many months. His car was not well maintained and his radiator was completely dry on one occasion when he visited. She attended Charles Skinner's funeral and was among the first to leave, as she did not know his family and relatives. She set off and took a wrong turning into a dead end – she was horrified that all the other people leaving the funeral followed her and had to turn around as she had to do!

Janet is still playing the mandolin and her advice to us all is to "Keep smiling and keep the moving parts moving!" I commend that idea to you all!

Anne Moller