

50-piece symphony orchestra serenades elderly elephant at the NEW Sydney Zoo

The NEW Sydney Zoo located in Western Sydney, celebrated the birthday of Saigon the last ex-circus elephant in Australia with a surprise performance from Sydney Youth Orchestras.

Saigon, an Asian Elephant, who reached the milestone age of 64 is more than a decade older than her species average life expectancy. To honour the momentous occasion, the elderly elephant was treated to a unique sensory experience.

The impressive 50-piece ensemble provided plenty of mental and physical stimulation for the birthday girl, playing all the classics including Happy Birthday.

"We know that music is a great form of enrichment and with Saigon in her twilight years, providing enrichment of this scale was very fitting" said Mick Harrison, Curator of Ungulates, Sydney Zoo.

"Elephants communicate far beyond our hearing range through deep infrasound which they can pick up through their highly sensitive feet, so it's wasn't surprising that she was very interested in the performance. You could see her placing weight on different feet to tune into the sound".

"She seemed to notice the change in tempo and displayed different behaviours like flapping her ears to the beat and squeaking with excitement. She even fancied herself as the conductor at one stage, lifting her trunk in the air in front of the orchestra".

"Her favourite song was Happy Birthday, so we played that a few times. She must have known it was her birthday".

Mia Patoulios, CEO of Sydney Youth Orchestras says, "Classical music can be accessible to all people...and clearly all animals too. At Sydney Youth Orchestras we provide a platform to educate young musicians to be future, professional musicians. Normally we perform on prestigious Sydney stages, providing amazing performance experiences - but this has got to be a first! We were proud to play at the NEW Sydney Zoo and create an atmosphere of celebration, continuing to bring classical music to life."

With Saigon being in her twilight years, a dedicated team of zookeepers have been keeping a close eye on her health. Whilst her recent welfare check showed positive results, the team at the NEW Sydney Zoo are committed to providing her with additional enrichment and care to make her final years as comfortable and blissful as possible.

Saigon is Australia's last ex circus elephant. She arrived in Australia 60 years ago and travelled with the Perry Bros Circus until 2010 when she retired on the family's farm. With her best interest at heart, Saigon's ageing owners had been searching for a new home and it was decided that the purpose -built habitat at the NEW Sydney Zoo was the perfect place for her to retire.

Since arriving to the NEW Sydney Zoo in November 2019 she has been known by the keepers as being one the most confident, charming yet stubborn elephants they have cared for.

"It's been a privilege to care for Saigon in her twilight years and to watch her enjoy the symphony orchestra is something I will never forget" said Jo Maitland, Elephant Keeper, Sydney Zoo

About Sydney Zoo

Sydney Zoo is a NEW world-class zoo in the heart of Western Sydney. The zoo is home to over 2,000 animals including a wide range of exotic and natives, Australia's largest Reptile and Nocturnal House and aquarium.

About Sydney Youth Orchestra

Sydney Youth Orchestras (SYO) is the leading orchestral training and education provider in New South Wales, with an annual membership of over 550 young musicians, aged 6-25, placed within 14 orchestras. Sydney Youth Orchestras teaches young musicians valuable, practical skills transforming students into professionals. It the pathway for young musicians to champion orchestral music. SYO alumni perform professionally within orchestras across Australia and the world.

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