



# AE NEWS

newsletter of the Australia Ensemble @UNSW

Never Stand Still

Music Performance Unit

## March Events

Australia Ensemble @UNSW

Free lunch hour workshop

**Thursday March 12, 2015**

**1.10 - 2.00pm**

**Tyree Room, Scientia Building**

Mezzo soprano Fiona Campbell

in a public masterclass with

singers from UNSW

Free, all welcome

Australia Ensemble @UNSW

Subscription Concert 1, 2015

**Saturday March 14, 2015**

**8.00pm**

**Sir John Clancy Auditorium**

Ravel: *Introduction and Allegro*

Bax: *Harp Quintet*

Fauré: *Piano Trio* in D minor

MacMillan: *Raising Sparks*

[australia.ensemble@unsw.edu.au](mailto:australia.ensemble@unsw.edu.au)

**Please note there is  
NO Lunch hour concert on  
Tuesday March 10 due to  
the inavailability of the venue.**

Explore the new  
Music Performance Unit  
website!

[www.music.unsw.edu.au](http://www.music.unsw.edu.au)

Information about upcoming  
events, musicians,  
composers, and past issues  
of the AE News.

## A vocal spark of energy

*The mezzo-soprano soloist in Raising Sparks is Fiona Campbell, a girl who is up for (almost) anything.* Her most recent forays have included an Angel Place Mozart in the City program with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. "The SSO played six overtures and then I sang the six enormous show-stopper arias from the same opera. No one would ever have to sing that much in a single opera, but I love witty and elegant programming."

The following week, back in her home town of Perth, she was off to present her own show for the Perth Fringe Festival – an exquisitely arranged *Quo Tardis* (pun intended) with cult guitarist Simon Rivet-Herrmann, which raises the bar on eclecticism and ranges from Radiohead to Amy Winehouse via Caccini, an obscure Italian composer known mainly to devotees of the pre-Baroque. "It's not really cabaret but I do share some banter with the audience, as well as playing percussion and making my debut on bass guitar!" she revealed.

Then there's the matter of singing the role of Berthe in Rossini's *The Barber of Seville* at Opera in the Park before an estimated 25,000 people...

Fiona, described in The London Times as an 'estimable professional', has a vast repertoire: Elizabethan songs by John Dowland sit beside JS Bach's *Mass* in B minor and *St Matthew Passion*; Britten's *Cabaret Songs* beside *Messiah*; via Beethoven, Debussy chansons, Elgar's *Sea Pictures* and *Dream of Gerontius*. There's plenty of contemporary material as well: Luciano Berio, Peter Maxwell Davies' *Dark Angels*, John Tavener, and John Adams' *El Niño*. Contemporary Australian composers include Brett Dean, Graeme Koehne and Richard Mills.

Like any singer who tackles contemporary scores, Fiona says vocal stamina is crucial, more so than in more traditional scores. "Composers such as Luciano Berio (whose *Folk Songs* I'm performing later this year with the Auckland Philharmonia) make very different demands on both the voice and a singer's more traditional techniques.

"You have to do things which singers aren't usually trained to do, often involving your teeth and lips. It's the vocal equivalent of pianists striking the strings of the piano with a hammer rather than the keys to achieve a specific effect."



Fiona Campbell, guest mezzo-soprano  
*Raising Sparks* with the  
Australia Ensemble @UNSW in March  
[photo: Michael Kämpf]



Fiona is no stranger to the Australia Ensemble: she has sung Gabriel Fauré's gorgeous and gentle song cycle *La bonne chanson*, Ravel's *Chansons madécasses*, and Arnold Schoenberg's somewhat more challenging *Pierrot Lunaire*, once described by ABC Radio National's Andrew Ford as 'cabaret for the psychotic'.

"When I first heard *Pierrot Lunaire*, I felt slightly unmoved but when I performed it, my reaction changed completely and I became completely absorbed in it. Not that I'm comparing *Raising Sparks* with *Pierrot Lunaire*! This is first time I've sung any of James MacMillan's music and I haven't yet had a chance to get my head completely around what is a highly complex score, but the first prominent impression I had was one of intense lyricism. The instrumental onomatopoeia is really striking.

"I think it's marvellous that both the composer and poet are still relatively young men at the zenith of their creative powers, who have created something genuinely contemporary which will in a sense, 'grow' the more it is performed.

"I love working with the Australia Ensemble: they're great colleagues and I'm especially looking forward to hooking up with Dene Olding, with whom I worked recently at the Mozart in the City concert. It's always reassuring when tackling a new work that you're with such tried and true professionals".

Greg Keane

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## Love and mercy in the darkness

If you read Paul Stanhope's message in the final 2014 newsletter, you'll recall he referred to the overarching theme of the 2015 series as *Raising Sparks* and in our inaugural offering for this year, that's precisely what the major work at the March concert is called! It's one of many musical catherine wheels in store throughout the year.

*Raising Sparks* is by James MacMillan, (born 1959) who has been described as 'Scotland's greatest musical export' and one of the most powerful and distinctive voices in international contemporary music, with formidable intellectual heft.

He studied at the Universities of Edinburgh and Durham, where he gained a PhD, lectured at Victoria University in Manchester and sprang to recognition after the premiere of his work *The Confession of Isobel Gowdie* at the 1990 Proms. Isobel Gowdie was one of many women burnt at the stake for witchcraft in 17<sup>th</sup> century Scotland. MacMillan has written that "the work craves absolution and offers Isobel Gowdie the mercy and humanity that was denied her in the last days of her life".

The work's reception inspired MacMillan's creative eclecticism early in his composing career: in 1992 he composed a concerto for percussion and orchestra based on what was both a French Advent plainchant and an Anglican hymn: *Veni, veni Emmanuel* (O come, o come Emmanuel). Its approachable idiom and fascinating sound world have guaranteed its endurance as one of MacMillan's most frequently performed works.

Among his other works are a cello concerto (dedicated to and premiered by Rostropovich) and piano, oboe and violin concertos. Like many creative souls, MacMillan's inspiration stems from being, in a religious sense at least, an outsider.

As a practising Roman Catholic in Scotland who for centuries were persecuted and forced to practise their faith clandestinely, MacMillan has always been part of a minority.



Composer James MacMillan  
[photo: Hans van der Woerd]

Even when legalised, Catholics in Scotland remained socially marginalised by the Protestant hegemony. During the Reformation, Scotland opted for a more extreme and austere form of Protestantism based on the teaching of Calvin and John Knox and did not benefit from the more benign, moderate and compromising influence of the Church of England, which was and remains virtually non-existent there. By contrast, while maintaining anti-Catholic legislation until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, England regarded Roman Catholics more tolerantly, especially recusant noble families (those who refused to convert to the Church of England after the Reformation), such as the



Fitzalan Howards, headed by the Duke of Norfolk, Britain's premier Duke. The glamorous mystique of 'posh' Catholics was epitomized by Evelyn Waugh's depiction of the louche Marchmain family in *Brideshead Revisited*. Much of MacMillan's output has been influenced by Catholic spirituality and the composer himself once publicly raged in a 1999 speech against the continuing discrimination against Catholics in Scotland.

*Raising Sparks* (1997) is a song cycle for mezzo-soprano and chamber ensemble comprising piano, flute, harp, clarinet and string quartet, and while intensely spiritual has a Jewish rather than Roman Catholic connection (although the author Michael Symmons Roberts is a Catholic convert). Symmons Roberts was prompted to compose his poems after reading the works of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Rabbi and mystic Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl, a place whose name became fraught with meaning and apocalyptic associations in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nahum devised a creation theory with two contrasting elements: the *Zimzum* (described by Symmons Roberts as 'God holding back light to create other than himself') and *Shevira* ('God shining His light of creation but that light is so intense it smashes the clay vessels designed to capture it'). The 'sparks' of the title are scattered throughout the world and become the seeds of love and mercy. The vocal element demands intense virtuosity, and the musical description of the two terms also acts as connective tissue between

each song. Not surprisingly, one reviewer interpreted the breaking of the vessels and the shattering of the light as "a portent of the Chernobyl nuclear meltdown disaster." The work is sung and played continuously. Despite its title, *Raising Sparks* is predominantly dark and enigmatic, and Symmons Roberts' imagery is relentless, cumulative and complex to the point of surrealism.

Much of the work is apparently conventional, even perhaps banal, but innately mystical. It begins with the mezzo-soprano soloist singing an incantation clearly drawn from Jewish motifs, and continues through the second and third songs, which begins concretely with the lines "I have raised a family in every city between Kiev and New York". The end of this song and the next are the dramatic pinnacles of the work with hostile, threatening eruptions from the ensemble. The fourth song is the most graphic and pessimistic as it details the tragedies which have befallen those who have tried to harness the sparks. MacMillan himself has described this imagery as having 'a sense of danger and a whiff of the pogrom'. The final lines "I saw an evil man spit fury but his curses came like catherine wheels" remind us the sparks can also be malignant. The last two songs are more intimate: the first recitative-like and the final using chorale, folk-song and dance tropes to the accompaniment of harp chords into an ambiguous close. Be prepared for a wild journey!

Greg Keane

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## Forging a bright new path



Since joining the Australia Ensemble as resident clarinetist in 1995, Catherine McCorkill has charmed audiences with her warmth and technical prowess in some remarkable and memorable performances. The Clarinet Quintets of Mozart and Brahms were certainly audience favourites, and her performance in the premiere of Nigel Westlake's *Rare Sugar* led to the APRA/AMC Award for best performance of an Australian work in 2008. Catherine's contribution to clarinet performance and to chamber music is incalculable.

Many among the Australia Ensemble audience will recall the first instance of Catherine's absence from the subscription series in March 2013, when it was announced that she was suffering from a hand injury sustained the previous year while playing the E flat clarinet in a production of Richard Strauss's opera *Salome*. The injury took some time to be diagnosed and required Catherine to undergo considerable treatment, rendering her unable to perform in the Australia Ensemble 2013 and 2014 seasons. As a professional clarinetist of the highest calibre, this has been a very difficult period for Catherine, who has had to look at the many possibilities for her future career.

Although Catherine will not be returning to play with the Australia Ensemble, the treatment on her hand does continue, and she recently accepted a place in a Masters of Clinical Audiology program at Macquarie University which she has since commenced. Catherine takes on this new challenge with all the support of her Australia Ensemble colleagues and no doubt the entire Australia Ensemble audience. Although her sublime playing will be sorely missed, many thanks go to Catherine for her years of dedication to the Australia Ensemble and her outstanding musicianship. She is offered every good wish as she embarks on her new career.

Sonia Maddock

# A chamber music technician

***Filling the role of clarinetist for the 2015 season, we are pleased to be able to formally welcome associate artist David Griffiths to the Australia Ensemble @UNSW. I sat down with the Armidale native to talk chamber music, inspiration and perfect Sunday mornings.***

David Griffiths clearly lives, breathes and sleeps clarinet. He is Senior Lecturer in the instrument and Co-ordinator of Woodwind at Monash University, positions which he holds in conjunction with a busy schedule of performing and collaborating.

“Clarinet became who I was from a very early age,” David says. “Growing up in Armidale with a clarinet teacher for a mum, I don’t think I had much choice!” Having been inspired by his mum to pick up the instrument at age 8, the clarinet became a consuming passion. David studied at the Canberra School of Music with a former Australia Ensemble associate artist Alan Vivian, alongside whom he played in the Canberra Symphony Orchestra in his first professional engagement.

Furthering his studies at the Manhattan School of Music, David was able to indulge his love for chamber music in four intensive semesters with clarinetist and chamber musician David Krakauer, whom David counts among the most inspiring figures in his life. “His teaching was incredible! We were able to learn in detail some of the major works for clarinet in the chamber music repertoire.” Studying with Krakauer afforded David the opportunity to spend entire semesters getting deep into the hearts of the Brahms Trio, the Brahms Quintet and Messiaen’s Quartet for the End of Time, surely three of the pillars of chamber repertoire featuring the clarinet. “[Krakauer]’s ability to teach musical interpretation, collaboration, and communication was extraordinary,” enthuses David. “The skills I learned from these coaching sessions will stay with me for ever.”

David is no stranger to the orchestral domain, having held permanent and guest principal positions with all of Australia’s major symphony orchestras, but it is arguably his engagements as a chamber musician for which he is best known. For David, chamber music is all about musical expression, communication and spontaneity, and as a member of both Ensemble Liaison at Monash and (now) as associate artist with the Australia Ensemble @UNSW, he is ever striving to further explore these aspects. “With chamber music I am able to interpret the music in the way that connects with me, often intuitively,” David says, describing one of the most unique traits of the chamber genre, and a notion with which the other core members of the Australia Ensemble would surely agree.

Of the AE, David says “It was somewhat daunting coming in for my first rehearsal with [them]! Performing together for twenty plus years helps an ensemble to develop an incredible understanding of each other.” But, he is quick to point out, it is this level of dedication to chamber performance which makes playing alongside these musicians so inspiring. “Working with six of the most experienced chamber musicians in the country [is] an absolute treat.” David also lists the Ensemble’s long history and incredible versatility of instrumentation as being among its most attractive aspects. “On any given concert program the clarinet might find itself in many different roles”, he says, emphasising yet another unique facet of chamber music, which is that it always has the potential to be fresh and exciting.

Recently, David has been exploring a passion for klezmer music, particularly the music of Golijov and Kovacs, from which he derives an enormous amount of satisfaction.

More importantly, though, what does a perfect Sunday look like for this versatile, passionate and consummate musician? After all, there’s more to life than music, isn’t there? “A morning swim with my wife and 7 year old daughter, followed by pancakes, waffles and coffee at the farmers market!” Sounds pretty good to me.

Finally, as we get up to leave, I just have to know. “Brahms or Mozart?”, I ask. “Don’t make me choose! They [the clarinet quintets – Ed.] are both masterpieces. But, if I really had to choose, I’d probably have to go with the Brahms. I’m a romantic!”

We are pleased to welcome David Griffiths to the Australia Ensemble, and look forward to a year of world-class chamber music with him in the fold.



Luke Iredale