



AE NEWS

newsletter of the Australia Ensemble @UNSW

Never Stand Still

Music Performance Unit

April Events

Australia Ensemble @UNSW

Free lunch hour concert

Tuesday April 14, 2015

1.10 - 2.00pm

Leighton Hall, Scientia Building

Haydn: *Flute quartet* Op.5 no.3

Sculthorpe: String quartet no.8

Ravel: Mother Goose suite arr.

Munro

Australia Ensemble @UNSW

Free lunch hour workshop

Thursday April 16, 2015

1.10 - 2.00pm

Leighton Hall, Scientia Building

Violinist Dene Olding in a public

masterclass with musicians from

UNSW

Free, all welcome

Australia Ensemble @UNSW

Subscription Concert 2, 2015

Saturday April 18, 2015

8.00pm

Sir John Clancy Auditorium

Bresnick: *My Twentieth Century*

Sculthorpe: *Irkanda IV*

Ravel: *Duo* for violin & cello

Carter: *Esprit rude, esprit doux*

Elgar: *Piano quintet*

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Playing the last century

It is no secret to the other members of the Australia Ensemble that Geoffrey Collins is very pleased to be performing Martin Bresnick's *My Twentieth Century* in the April subscription concert. Geoffrey last performed it in 2004 at the Australian Youth Orchestra's National Music Camp in Canberra where Bresnick was composer-in-residence, and he found it to be a very engaging piece. "It is much more transparent than Bresnick's previous works," Geoffrey offered. "There is a trajectory that carries the listener through; it builds up and intensifies over the course of the piece". *My Twentieth Century* (2002) is scored for flute, clarinet, piano, violin, viola and cello, but also requires each of the instrumentalists to narrate passages from a text by Bresnick's friend and colleague Tom Andrews.



Geoffrey Collins, flute

Sadly, the poet died between completing the work and its first performance in 2002, due to complications from haemophilia, a condition which affected him from his teenage years and coloured the perspective of much of his poetry. An American critic, Guy Davenport, said "They [the poems] are about the dominion of the spirit when it is rich in imagination and courage". Some of the associations in the text illustrate very personal elements of the poet's experience, including his thrill-seeking nature and love of motocross (*'I loved Kawasaki in the twentieth century'*) and his haemophilia (*'I shed pints of blood in the twentieth century'*) giving the work a very literal as well as a broader figurative meaning. The poem was written specifically as a component of the composition, and was completed in July 2001, shortly before Andrews' unexpected death at age 40. The composer dedicated the work to Andrews' memory.

Geoffrey Collins recalled that Bresnick was quite particular about the delivery of the text, aiming to ensure that the Australian speech patterns managed to capture the wistful character of Andrews' poem, which the composer describes "as if in a heightened conversation". The text itself is not complicated or intense; rather, comprising reflective and quite intimate musings on twentieth century life.

Perhaps Geoffrey shouldn't have been too concerned about his skills of public speaking. The composer generously reflected "I always love to hear the text Australian-accented. There was a wonderful performance at an AYO camp in

Canberra in 2004 that I will always treasure - with musicians Geoffrey Collins, flute; Peter Handsworth, clarinet; Lisa Moore, piano; Peter Exton, violin; Brett Dean, viola; and Sarah Morse, cello." Bresnick has strong connections with Australia, including a recent period of residency with the University of Western Australia on an Institute of Advanced Studies Fellowship, as well as two residencies with the Australian Youth Orchestra.

Bresnick is a well-established composer in the USA, having written for films, orchestras, chamber ensembles, voice, solo instruments, and in 2013 delved into opera with the production of *My Friend's Story*, based on a story by Anton Chekhov. Since taking on a Fulbright Fellowship in 1969, he has published an extensive catalogue of works, and been recipient of an extremely lengthy list of awards for both composition and teaching. Among his own teachers of composition was the revered composer György Ligeti, who was clearly a strong influence in his earlier work. Bresnick is presently the Professor of Composition and Coordinator of the Composition Department at the Yale School of Music.

My Twentieth Century is, however, the first of Bresnick's works to be performed by the Australia Ensemble @ UNSW. On this occasion, it will be the core members of the Ensemble whose sounds, both instrumental and vocal,

we will hear – Geoffrey Collins (flute) will be joined by Associate Artist David Griffiths (clarinet), Dene Olding (violin), Irina Morozova (viola), Julian Smiles (cello) and Ian Munro (piano). Reflecting on her own twentieth century, violist Irina Morozova remembers herself as an opinionated young violinist, but "puberty certainly brought a stop to such overt behaviour". Although obviously a confident violist, public speaking took greater personal courage for Irina, but she has always acquitted herself adequately. "If I have to act, raising my voice a tone or two makes it easier to 'become' a different persona. With that in mind, the prospect of speaking in the next subscription concert does not hold too many problems. However, negotiating my way from stand to stand, and in particular, not to lose my place in the process could be a problem. It remains to be seen how I do - why don't you come and see?"



Martin Bresnick

Sonia Maddock

Ravel's pas de deux

The death of France's leading composer, Claude Debussy, in 1918, inspired a commemorative issue of *La Revue Musicale*, which commissioned works in his memory. It spawned a spate of compositions from a field of thoroughbreds: Béla Bartók, Paul Dukas, Manuel de Falla, Eugene Goossens, Albert Roussel, Igor Stravinsky, Eric Satie and Maurice Ravel.

Ravel, who was universally considered to have assumed Debussy's mantle, offered a single movement work for violin and cello. He subsequently regarded it as unfinished business and, during the summer of 1921, revisited the score. The expansion of the movement into a full-scale sonata did not progress smoothly. "This devil of a duo makes me extremely ill," the normally inscrutable composer revealed. He eventually completed the four movement work in February 1922.

Ravel achieved a new idiom, which, consciously or otherwise, reflected the style of Debussy's own late masterpieces: terse, hauntingly spare and emotionally restrained to the point of elusiveness.

He wrote, "I believe this sonata marks a turning point in my career. In it, thinness of texture is pushed to the extreme. Harmonic charm is renounced with an increasingly conspicuous reaction in favour of melody."

The idiom is very different from the luxuriant impressionism

of *Daphnis & Chloe* or the uniquely Gallic neo-Classical chic of *Le Tombeau de Couperin*. The average listener would be hard put to identify the first movement as being by Ravel - it is not until the *pizzicati* of the second movement, reminiscent of the scherzo of the String Quartet, that there is a similarity to his more familiar style. Other major features are the intricate alternations of major/

minor keys and Eastern European folk song influences in the final two movements.

The violinist at the work's premiere, Helene Jourdan-Morhange, felt pushed to the limit by Ravel's perfectionist approach to ensemble. "It's complicated," she said. "In order to keep my end up, the cello has to sound like a flute and the violin like a drum. It must be fun writing such difficult stuff, but no one except virtuosos are going to play it."

Never lost for an acerbic retort, Ravel replied, "Good! Then it won't be assassinated by amateurs!"

The Australia Ensemble's husband and wife members Julian Smiles and Dimity Hall are the very much

professional soloists on this occasion. What do they make of the work? Some of their comments seem to echo those above.

"We've played it before. It's amazingly spare and tightly interwoven yet with intermittent explosions and lyrical interludes," Dimity said.



Maurice Ravel



Dimity Hall

Julian added that there were taxing passages for both players in unusual registers which created unique effects and others where the melody was divided between both instruments.

Both Dimity and Julian have been long-standing core members of the 35 year old Australia Ensemble. 2015 is shaping up as a year of anniversaries for them and two other AE members, Dene Olding, co-concertmaster of the Sydney Symphony and his violist wife Irina Morozova, who also happen to be the other half of the Goldner String Quartet.

One common element of both the Australia Ensemble and the Goldner Quartet is the extraordinary stability of their personnel. The Goldners (named after Richard Goldner, the founder of Musica Viva) are 20 years old and a national tour looms this year to celebrate both this milestone and Musica Viva's 70th birthday. Their program includes a specially composed work by Paul Stanhope to celebrate both these occasions and the 25th anniversary of the Huntington Festival.

Scientific research on identical twins notwithstanding, no other human association seems to attract as much creative speculation about psychological dynamics as string quartets. Witness the recent art house hit *A Late Quartet* (released in Australia as *Performance*) which starred Philip Seymour Hoffman and Christopher Walken.

"String quartet repertoire, by definition, generates intensity but it's sometimes easy to dramatise differences in approach as conflict. Whereas the AE repertoire is much more diverse and allows for more permutations," Dimity said. "Incidentally, we are always looking for new or unexplored repertoire."

Julian commented that initially potentially polarizing approaches in string quartet repertoire – not necessarily along marital fault lines either - are ultimately resolved into a harmonious whole.

Who can blame them for wanting to maintain an element of mystique?

Greg Keane



Julian Smiles

Celebrating greatness

Peter Sculthorpe was in many ways the quintessential Australian composer. His uniquely melodic and meditative music draws inspiration from our environment, our stories and our history. Especially in the realms of orchestral and chamber music, Peter was an innovator, forging a style of music that was unmistakably Australian. Ahead of performances of two of Peter's works in April with the Australia Ensemble, I sat down with violinist Dene Olding to talk about Peter, his music and his long history with the group.

When did you first become aware of Peter's music?

My first memory is being taken to a concert in Brisbane, and it was *Sun Music I*. I was about seven years old and I remember these guys on stage bouncing huge beach balls. Of course, I was a bit young to grasp what it was really all about, but it made an impact.

When in your career did you first perform one of Peter's compositions?

It was after I came back to Australia, to take up my position with the Ensemble in 1982. It may have been his sixth string quartet, which always held a special place in his heart being that it was written for someone he knew [Bonnie Drysdale]. Peter often used to mention it when he talked about his quartets. It was his first mature

and truly complete string quartet, but that string sonority was present all through his life. In fact, his first piece for quartet is one of his most poignant – the melody follows the contours of a poem taken from a gravestone. It's really quite heartfelt, and even at 14 years old he had this affinity for melodic instruments.

Peter is known for having distinctive sounds in his writing for strings. Are there any extended techniques from the quartets that have stuck with you as being particularly unique?

I think just those sonorities. He likes that open string sound on cello, which you can build harmonies over the top of. One of his signatures became the bird sounds in the quartets, especially seagulls. In later quartets, he used



Dene Olding

the didgeridoo. Much of his music has a chant-like quality, which implies a low pedal drone, which with Peter's blessing we later added to quartets which weren't even written with didgeridoo in mind.

Describe Peter's relationship with the Australia Ensemble.

We've played plenty of his music over the years, including the quartet version of *Earth Cry* [arguably Sculthorpe's most famous piece, originally an orchestral work]. Peter was like that – he often rearranged orchestral works. He made a version of *Irkanda IV* especially for us – given the line-up and the nature of the Ensemble, the flute often doesn't have enough repertoire to play with the strings. We've found it an extremely useful piece.

How is Irkanda IV representative of Peter's style as a whole?

It was written upon the death of his father and it's representative of that plaintive, plangent style, very reflective and soliloquy-like. He does that very well, that soulful sound with minor-ninth harmonies.

And of course there's that real Australian focus in his music.

The Aboriginal element is very much front and centre in his music. One quartet we play a lot [No. 11 - *Jabiru Dreaming*] used as a source Baudin's expedition around Australia. Parts of a chant he transcribed in 1802 are quoted in the quartet, sort of a descending scalar tune.

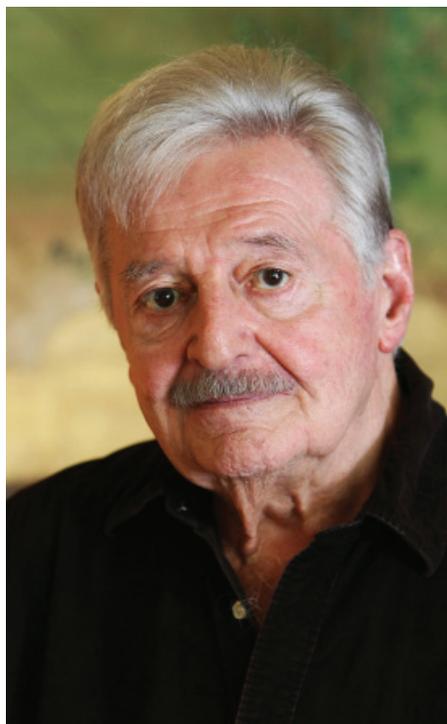
As a musician, what appeals to you about Peter's music?

You know what you're going to get when you open a piece of Sculthorpe, like it or not. He has a distinctive sound, and that's really the measure of any composer. If you divide his life into segments, you find that much of his earlier work is pastoral, quasi-English in style before he found his voice as a distinctly Australian composer. A lot of people give him credit for creating an Australian sound, drawn from the landscape, from the influence of Asia and so on.

What challenges are associated with rehearsing and performing Peter's music?

Sometimes the rhythms are not always so clear, even if they appear relatively simple on the page. Often it's repetitive, so you know what's coming, but there's also a displacement of the pulse which can throw you if you're not familiar with the work. He avoids the strong pulse on the beat, with ties across bar lines, but we've played so much Sculthorpe now that we can sort of go with the flow! It also helps, in playing Peter's work, actually being Australian and having heard the bird sounds, and having seen what the landscape is like. We were once at a workshop in Paris, and students were working on some of the quartets. The 'bird sounds' they produced were 'tweet, tweet', nightingale-like, very gentle and European. They had no idea of the sound of the dawn chorus. We had to explain, "No, be much more violent!" (laughs).

What's the background to the personal relationship between yourself and Peter?



Peter Sculthorpe
[photo: Bridget Elliott]

I didn't know him until later on, but my father and he were exact contemporaries in Launceston. They were considered two of the talented youngsters around, and they competed against each other in eisteddfods. So I always felt an affinity with Peter, and in fact he used to joke that he became a composer because my father used to beat him in all the piano competitions. He decided that maybe a solo piano career was not for him! (laughs)

What was Peter like on a personal level?

He was a gentle person, first of all, and that's reflected in his music. I sometimes wish he'd have written something like the *Rite of Spring*, something a bit more violent, just to show that side!

Did he have that side?

I haven't heard it. It was always tempered. When he got loud and intense and impassioned, it was always with that slower approach. He wasn't upfront, and you can hear that in his music. He had a social conscience about the world, hence his use of Aboriginal themes, environmental themes and so on.

What is Peter Sculthorpe's legacy? What did he leave to composition and to chamber music in Australia?

He's shown Australian composers a different path. Prior to Peter there were certainly some fine composers around, but he tried to tread a different path, find a different way from the mainstream American and European composers of the time. Even contemporaries like Alfred Hill were very much in the mould of European composers. He taught a generation of composers like John Peterson and Ross Edwards that music doesn't have to be extremely avant garde to be accepted – the melodic and emotional content can still be there, but with a somehow 'different' sound. That's why he's fascinated people overseas – it was such a unique voice. Of course he's had his critics, people who don't think it's 'substantial' enough, but the proof is in the pudding from people who've played his music – his music is instantly recognisable, and that's not something that's easy to do.

Luke Iredale

**Dene Olding will also present
a free public masterclass with student violinists
of UNSW
Thursday April 16, 2015
1.10 - 2.00pm
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All welcome**