

AE News

October 2020

What's Online

Special Event

Join us for a very special online Australia Ensemble UNSW presentation, celebrating subscriber Mrs Norma Hawkins' Honorary Fellowship Conferral, 2020 featuring a program of Vine, Beethoven, Tchaikovsky and Grieg music.unsw.edu.au/special-event-australia-ensemble-unsw-concert-mrs-norma-hawkins%E2%80%99-honorary-fellowship-conferral

2021 Season Announcement

The MPU team is working to deliver the 2021 season dates to you before the end of the year. Please check our website for updates music.unsw.edu.au

Harp In Chamber Music

We are excited to announce the release of some new music to brighten your week: Ravel, Debussy and Salzedo, played with long-time friend, harpist Alice Giles



Stillness amid the chaos

The challenge of the Melbourne lockdown has impacted Australia Ensemble musicians David Griffiths and Ian Munro, unable to come to Sydney to work with their colleagues. One of our responses was a home town project - a brand new commissioned work for clarinet and piano, by Melbourne-based composer Katy Abbott. We chatted to Katy about her new work, and her approach to composing for clarinet and piano. When this commission was first envisioned in July 2020, Katy wrote "The focus is less on virtuosic playing but rather to reflect further on what I've learned during a much quieter and more 'still' few months. I think creating metaphorical space within the music, through stillness, beauty and simplicity creates potential and capacity for audience reflection which both stimulates curiosity about ourselves and each other as well as inform us about how we show up in the world."



Composer: Katy Abbott

Did this original concept form the core of your work, or has it evolved into something else over the past 4 months?

This is exactly what I've ended up writing. The vision for this work was really clear when I wrote this statement. This spaciousness within the piece provides an upside-down virtuosity – a way for the duo to connect deeply through the music; the space provides exposure – which although beautiful, is also vulnerable, fragile.

The first lockdown in Melbourne provided space for me to regroup which is where the concept was initiated. The second lockdown, the one we are still in, is more about personal capacity. I have watched my family, friends, neighbours, and colleagues wrestle, push and tire. All with terrific attitudes!

This piece was the only piece that could be composed (for me) during this time. I hope it is one of peace and hope. My home office looks out to my front veranda and I have spent many days looking at the sunlight dappled through the lovely twisted gum tree. This reminds me of strength and stillness which I am sure is represented in the work somehow.

What do you enjoy when composing for the combination of clarinet and piano? What challenges are there?

The challenge is not to get stuck into a solo with piano accompaniment setting. It is not such a challenge when one is aware of it. The two lines work together, and this was a joy to imagine David and Ian creating a single narrative/atmosphere.

How does your research into writing for the voice influence your instrumental writing?

The voice is a very strong influence in all my works. I compose by singing most of the lines. Nothing fancy, just into my iPhone voice memos.

Not only is voice my only (somewhat flawed) instrument, but I am influenced by it because it comes out of the body itself.

Most of my work has some focus on people and, in particular, what is going on under the surface – in the mind and heart so for the voice to be part of my compositional process sits well with me.

Where do you envision this piece going? Who do you hope uses the educational resources being developed around this commission?

Although this piece is written during lockdown in 2020, it is my hope *Still* is not packaged into 'a lockdown' piece box. Of course, I hope it is performed widely because of its inherent musical and human qualities that speak more broadly to an audience through the performers' interpretation.

How do you think organisations and patrons of classical music can best support gender equity, and increased diversity and inclusivity in Australia's classical music industry?

Being aware, being deliberate. Actions are the strongest indicator of commitment.



David Griffiths & Ian Munro
[photo: Keith Saunders]

A New Zealand Sextet

by Ian Munro, Australia Ensemble UNSW Pianist

There was a time, before the car crash that disabled one of my knees, when I had the habit of running daily. Coming up to Sydney for work, it would be a secret pleasure to explore the byways of suburbs like Woolloomooloo and Glebe by streetlamp. My day runs would be more like rides on a tourist bus, and I have seen cities all over the world in my running shoes. It was on a tour of New Zealand with the Australia Ensemble UNSW in 1998 that I developed a desire to write about what I felt and saw while pounding the pavements and trails.

That enjoyable tour was one of the first with my AE colleagues. Having worked with Dene and Geoff previously, Dimity, Julian, Irena and Cathy were all new and welcome friends. I learned, among other things, that Dene had a fund of naughty jokes, that Irena's belly laugh reminded me of my sister's, and that fastidious and ultra-dependable Julian was capable of being almost as forgetful as I (a taxi run out to the airport is never the best time to discover that one's passport is still back at the hotel).

We played in Dunedin, Christchurch, Nelson, Wellington, Palmerston North, Napier, Hamilton and Auckland in theatres large and small, a convention room and a 1930s cinema. On the bill was Elgar's mysterious piano quintet, the quirky flute trio by Weber, Carl Vine's *Café Concertino* and no doubt several other pieces I have now forgotten. Most travel days, we would arrive and rehearse, and I would change into my running gear and go out on foot before dinner, afterwards pondering what I'd seen and felt, and sketching words over the next day or two. Here, then, is what came of those micro adventures.

After morning rehearsals and sound check at the Dunedin Art Gallery, I went for a quick run up into the hills, passing by St Joseph's Cathedral, skirting the botanic gardens and ending at the historic 'gingerbread' style railway station.

Dunedin

*Hacking into the dark hills
wheezing like a tin whistle
among straggling faithful
unchurching as the light fails.
Tacking back along Dunedin
and its coal-fed chamber-pot rooms
a dark railway cathedral looms.
An empty train disappears in.*

Although the poplars are still patiently standing in Hagley Park and the cathedral clutches at life, its remaining limbs in massive architectural splints, the Art Society building I wrote about is no more and the feel of the city is quite different now from the peaceful restraint it formerly had. A city that has suffered enormously since I wrote this reverie.

Christchurch

*Across deep and empty rugby fields,
the sedimentary settling of the sun.
A hundred joggers wend in
straggly ones and twos. It feels
like there's a zoo of trees here —
lion-footed poplars, willows
swan-like in mute obeisance,
loping pines, giraffe on savannah.
I pass a bored schoolboy, leaning
against a leprous elm trunk,
before catching a tram back
to the hotel, slewing
under a curlicued overhead,
past the squat layer-cake Art Society,
a vacant lot slung with debris,
and collapse, felled, on the bed.*

Flying into Windy Wellington is an experience that can range from mild excitement to white knuckle terror, and I sometimes wonder what the ferry ride from Picton across the Cook Strait must be like. On this occasion, we made it down on the first pass, on a typical day of wind and rain. This did not prevent a brisk run along the foreshore of Oriental Bay and up to Mount Victoria.

Wellington

*Rounding a corner of the black bay,
the track becomes a trestle and narrows.
In a cave of night gusting with stars
a constant fine rain picks its way
underneath layers of running gear.
I think, as I follow the low sea wall
past flocking sloops and dinghies, of all
the music, like yesterday's, that is over.*

Some 140km north east of Wellington, Palmerston North nestles between the Tararua and Ruahine ranges and is flanked to the east by the considerable Manawatu River. The formidable local pianist Michael Houstoun played a crucial role in rescuing the marvellous Regent Theatre from demolition in the 1990s, also spearheading a campaign to raise money for a Steinway grand piano. We need more Michaels.

Palmerston North

*To the left of the mossy footbridge
riding an imagined stream,
cedars move like warnings in a dream.
Stands of gentle ash below far-off Tararua Range
enclose the brown Manawata river,
clanking westward as hunched storms press
in from the north. Amid the clatter of birds,
I come to think again of my father.*

The Hawkes Bay town of Napier is justly famous for its Art Deco architecture, a result of its previous cityscape being obliterated in a massive earthquake in 1931, something of a recurring story in New Zealand.

Napier

*Out of town along the windy north road
points chunk home at the sea port
where fruit and sand are shunting in as freight.
The Indian Reefer, lit up, accepts her load.
I'm running on now between gritted rails,
drawn yet again by work and water,
watching the lowering sun from the shore
as it dips and turns sleeping clouds into snails.*

Invercargill, the last stop on our journey, is another town with a Scots heritage, like Dunedin, and Otago gold paid for the fine Civic Theatre we played in. Flying down from the north in a metroliner or Dash 8 gives you a spectacular view of the expansive Otago rivers and southern Fiordland, the meanders looking like scribbles from that height.

Invercargill

*South of glaciers and scribbling grey rivers,
flat huddled town crouches under the pale
moon.
A few briquettes burning in early afternoon
lay a silt over the dog-ends of suburbs.*

Everyone enjoyed the time we had together, except perhaps for poor Dene, who capped it off with an attack of kidney stones. Ouch.

Holly Harrison slipstreams into October

Australian composer Holly Harrison was originally due to premerie *Slipstream* in our 2020 October subscription concert, however this concert was cancelled due to the world-wide pandemic. We were keen to hear Holly's inside scoop on the new commission and what she had in mind when she composed *Slipstream*. We chat to her about the new work, her inspirations and what we can look forward to hearing when the work is rescheduled.



Composer: Holly Harrison

Can you please describe your new work *Slipstream* and what audiences can look forward to hearing when we return to the concert hall?

The word 'slipstream' refers to the current of air behind a rapidly moving vehicle. In motorsports, this reduced air pressure and forward suction allows vehicles to follow closely behind another, with the least resistance, before overtaking. The work is cast in five short movements, each streaming on from the next. In this way, *Slipstream* is imagined as different types of musical motion and momentum – duos and trios within the sextet are pulled along by opposing subsets before making their own move and overtaking. The most obvious example of this is the contrast between straight and swung rhythms and faster and slower tempos: each can be heard as an attempt to push or pull against the current, before slipping into a new direction. The overall effect is quite playful, with plenty of deception and subterfuge at work.

The theme of the original concert, 'A Song before the Storm', greatly impacted the shape of the piece. I spent much time considering how the theme could play a role in the structure of *Slipstream*, perhaps in an unexpected way. Rather than interpreting this linearly, I chose to weave song-like melodies before, during, between, and after the movements, creating an outer frame for the work. This means that the piece begins and ends with slower lyrical sections, which is quite unusual for me, but something I've greatly enjoyed experimenting with! In my mind, a sense of longer lines and phrases underpins the piece, and is broken up by frantic and rhythmic bursts, and groove sections. Stylistically, the work embraces blues and folk elements alongside (imagined) sea shanties, jaunty swing, hot jazz, and lyrical ballad moments. You can expect to hear the occasional foot stomp and perhaps a grunt too!

You composed *Slipstream* during a world-wide pandemic - did this influence your approach or process in any way?

It did! The idea of using *Slipstream* as a title jumped out at me after reading articles in April about whether the 'slipstream' of a runner or cyclist was especially hazardous for contracting COVID-19. I soon found myself holding my breath as cyclists flew past, visualising virus droplets hanging in their wake. It didn't take long before I was thinking about how a slipstream could be reimagined into a musical context.

If you could meet any creative or artist from any time period, who would it be and why?

Without a doubt Freddie Mercury of Queen fame. Not only was Freddie an extraordinary musician, performer, and song-writer, but his unparalleled creativity pushed the boundaries of rock music. Freddie is perhaps single-handedly responsible for igniting my love of rock as a ten year old, leading me to take up the drums! I've always greatly admired the stylistic fusion and bombastic flair of Queen's musicality.