

AE NEWS

newsletter of the Australia Ensemble @UNSW

May Events

Australia Ensemble @UNSW

Free lunch hour concert

Tuesday May 9, 2017

1.10 - 2.00pm

Leighton Hall, Scientia Building

Corigliano: *Voyages*

Liebermann: Flute sonata Op.23

Gade: *Novelletten*

Australia Ensemble @UNSW

Subscription Concert 3, 2017

Saturday May 13, 2017 at 8pm

Sir John Clancy Auditorium

Americana

Higdon: *Smash*

Copland: Duo

Dvorak: String quartet no. 12

'*American*'

Adams: *Gnarly Buttons*

UNSW Wind Symphony &
Orchestra

Friday May 26, 2017 at 7pm

Sir John Clancy Auditorium

including Krommer: Clarinet

Concerto in E flat major, with

Cameron Burgess, clarinet

Collegium Musicum Choir

Sunday May 28, 2017 at 5pm

Sir John Clancy Auditorium

Handel: Coronation Anthems

Mozart: Requiem

with Sarah Ampil, soprano; Nyssa

Milligan, alto; Richard Butler, tenor;

Andrew O'Connor, bass

www.music.unsw.edu.au

David Griffiths gets gnarly

ANGUS McPHERSON

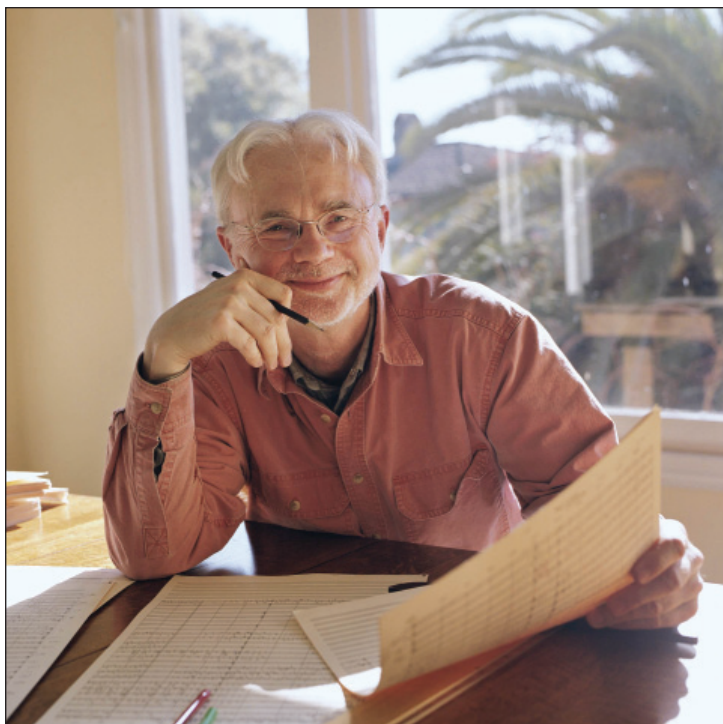
Even the name of John Adams' clarinet concerto *Gnarly Buttons* conjures up something out of the ordinary. "Gnarly" means knotty, twisted or covered with gnarls... your basic village elder's walking stick," Adams wrote. "In American school kid parlance it takes on additional connotations of something to be admired: 'awesome,' 'neat,' 'fresh,' etc. etc."



For clarinetist David Griffiths, who will be playing the solo in the Australia Ensemble's *Americana* concert, Adams' work is unique. "It is completely tonal, at times absolutely beautiful," he says. "Other moments are folksy, but sometimes it pushes the boundaries in different directions. It is really not like anything I have ever played before. His choice of instruments is just brilliant: strings, the banjo, mandolin and guitar, trombone and low double reeds along with synthesiser sounds create an incredibly unique sound world."

Adams was a clarinet player himself – it was his first instrument – and this comes across in the writing. "Although it is a challenging work – sometimes rhythmically and at other times technically – most of the writing sits very well on the clarinet," Griffiths explains. "He clearly has an excellent understanding of how to write for the instrument – challenging but not unplayable. He sometimes even includes suggested fingerings for certain notes, which almost never happens."

Gnarly Buttons is in many ways a tribute to American folk music. The first movement, *The Perilous Shore*, is supposedly based on a Protestant hymn, from the 19th-century volume *The Footsteps of Jesus*. But Adams later



Composer John Adams [photo: Deborah O'Grady]

admitted he invented the tune (and the hymn book) himself. In fact, the other two movements – *Hoedown (Mad Cow)* and *Put Your Loving Arms Around Me* – are also musical “forgeries”.

“Adams describes the forgery as an imagined musical model,” Griffiths says. “For instance, in the case of the *Hoedown*, on one hand it is clearly not a Hoedown, but it gives the impression of a Hoedown, in its own quirky way.”

“Similarly the third movement, *Put Your Loving Arms Around Me* is a simple love song, but is it really? Knowing that Adams has described these as forgeries hasn’t really affected the way I approach them. Like any good forgery, I feel my job is to play each movement as much as possible in the ‘original’ style that the forgery is attempting to copy.”

Despite being a concerto, Griffiths sees *Gnarly Buttons* more as a chamber work. “The clarinet clearly has a ‘solo’ part,” he says, “a thread which weaves its way through the entire piece, but along that journey the clarinet interacts with all the different instruments at one point or another. It feels like it will be much more important to find the collective interpretation by the whole ensemble, rather than the more traditional soloist and accompaniment interpretation.”

The quirky nature of the concerto also throws up challenges for the soloist. “In more standard concertos the main themes keep reoccurring, helping us to learn the overall structure of the work,” Griffiths says. “This concerto occasionally has reoccurring motives, but when they come back they have often changed and developed.”

Most of all, though, *Gnarly Buttons* is fun. “The *Hoedown* is a quirky and fun folk music party,” Griffiths explains. “And the final movement is clearly a beautiful love song, which, in John Adams’ words is ‘quiet and tender up front, gnarled and crabbed at the end.’”

Each movement has its own charms. “The unison opening sound of clarinet and accordion in *The Perilous Shore*, the *Hoedown* will be a hoot, and the final movement is absolutely beautiful,” Griffiths says. “I can’t wait to experience them all. But I can’t go without mentioning the ‘cow’ moment. Listen out for the cow about halfway through the *Hoedown*.”

Snapshots of progress

Between rehearsals of the Mozart Clarinet Quintet and Nielsen’s Wind Quintet in April, clarinetist David Griffiths spent some time working with two young clarinetists from UNSW in a public masterclass. Accompanied by pianist Josephine Allan (who will be back on campus in May as part of the *Gnarly Buttons* experience), clarinetists Ben Curry-Hyde and Cameron Burgess were put through their paces and worked on some intricacies of the repertoire and of



L to R: Cameron Burgess, Ben Curry-Hyde, Josephine Allan, David Griffiths

the instrument itself. David’s expertise was put to good use, and will no doubt have an ongoing impact on these musicians.

Audiences can hear Cameron Burgess again in May, first with the UNSW Orchestra on Friday May 26, with which he will perform Krommer’s Clarinet Concerto in E flat in the Sir John Clancy Auditorium. He will return to the Clancy Auditorium on Sunday May 28 at 5pm as one of the bass horn players with the Collegium Musicum Choir, a crucial instrumental element of Mozart’s *Requiem*.

Beginning with a Smash

On the metronome, the tempo marking of crotchet = 142-152 most definitively comes up as 'Presto', and when faced with a page of semiquavers punctuated by rests, it is clearly not going to be a calm and peaceful undertaking. Jennifer Higdon's short ensemble piece *Smash* was a reworking of an earlier trio work, *DASH*, both pieces reflecting on the frenetic urban life of the 21st century. It is five minutes of raw energy with relentless momentum.

The piece came into the AE program as representative of an American composer of the newer generation. Artistic Chair Paul Stanhope caught on to several reasons why it was an ideal start to the Australia Ensemble's concert. "Jennifer Higdon is a composer of vibrant and energetic music that I have been interested in for some time. In looking for some newer voices to feature as part of our 'Americana' voyage, her short, energetic piece '*Smash*' seemed the perfect fit for the concert. Firstly, it is written for the Australia Ensemble line up which underlines our identity as a mixed ensemble, secondly it is a short work – kind of like a tasting plate – that might introduce her work to the audience and, thirdly, it gives the ensemble opportunity to feature the work of composing women. It's something of a sub-theme in our 2017 concert series."

Having been a member of the Australia Ensemble since its early days, flautist Geoffrey Collins remains up for the challenge which a piece like *Smash* brings to the group. "Ensemble is the key here, matching articulations across the different instruments to make a 'group' sound rather than being so aware of the individuals." This no doubt means quite a lot of homework for the five musicians to be fully prepared to jump into the rehearsals with their colleagues, something they are well accustomed to. Geoffrey concedes there will be "a lot of metronome practice", and really getting to know the piece as a rigorous ensemble work by working through the score individually. "It's about understanding all the rhythms in the other parts via the score... all of the standard things we do which hopefully make the piece 'cook' from an audience point of view."

Many in our audience won't have heard of Jennifer Higdon, who has emerged as an important figure in American music having won both a Grammy award and a Pulitzer Prize for her work as well as several significant fellowships and other awards. Much of her work requires a high level of virtuosity and has a characteristic appeal which has made her one of the most frequently performed American composers, with an extensive catalogue. *Smash* is a little bite from that salver, and a worthwhile one as Paul Stanhope elucidates. "Although it is a short piece, I think it is significant that we hear these newer voices in order to get to know the musical language a little. Jennifer has had some really significant commissions in the USA, in the UK and also Europe, including works for major orchestras. It's about time we heard her music in Australia and, perhaps if the audience likes it, we might hear a larger piece sometime in the future!"



Pulitzer prize-winning composer Jennifer Higdon



Diplomacy, Deception and Death

MIREI BALLINGER

The act of composition has had a long history as an instrument of diplomacy and politics. From honouring the patronage of a wealthy or royal benefactor to driving cultural revolutions, many composers have had a hand in the delicate balance of power and influence through their chosen art.

Consider then, as a 42-year-old composer from Halle, George Friedrich Handel owed his allegiance to King George I who recently granted him naturalization as an English citizen. Unfortunately, in a disastrous turn of events, Handel had not only embarrassed himself but also embarrassed the Prince of Wales, the king's son. As the impresario and conductor of the Royal Academy of Music, Handel had been conducting the latest season of operas and concerts with the Prince in the audience, when two prima donnas started fighting on stage. As the Academy relied almost entirely on the funding from the Prince, the season had subsequently been cancelled and the next was in question.

How then was Handel to smooth things over with the Prince, without treading on the toes of his father, the king, with whom it was well known that he often quarrelled? The solution made itself apparent only a week later in fact, when George I passed away and left his son to succeed him as George II. Unbidden, Handel composed four coronation anthems for the new king's coronation on October 17, 1727.

Solutions, of course, are not without their challenges: at first, the ecclesiastical authorities muscled in to supply the appropriate words for the anthems. Here Handel stood firm and argued that though the words were personally selected by the composer himself, it was traditional from the coronation of King James

II. A second problem lay ahead, however, in the venue at which the coronation would take place. The vast space of Westminster Abbey is a challenge for any composer to fill with sound as grandiose as befits a coronation. The outcome was a much more extroverted quality to Handel's compositional style with emphasis on contrasting colours, and an augmented choir and orchestra to fill

She first turned to Joseph Eybler, a composer whom her husband had admired, but he soon returned the manuscripts unfinished. So she then took the unfinished requiem to Süssmayr, a student of Mozart's, who managed to finish the commission using fragments and sketches left by the late composer and Eybler. The completed score was sent off to its commissioner in 1793 with a



UNSW's Collegium Musicum Choir will perform Handel's Coronation Anthems and Mozart's Requiem

out the sound. Despite the Archbishop of Canterbury's view of its "wretched" performance, it was a success in every way; it has been played at every British coronation since.

In another time and place altogether, another death had occurred leaving Constanze, the widow of the late Mozart, in quite a different bind. Mozart had left behind an enormous debt and an unfinished commission for a mass for the dead. Being the businesswoman that she was, Constanze recognised that the commission had to be finished in as close to Mozart's hand as possible, and quickly too, to secure the second half of the payment. Discretion was of the utmost importance, for she needed to pass off the work as having been completed before Mozart's death.

counterfeited signature of Mozart and dated the year prior.

The Requiem was first publically performed in January of 1793, in a benefit concert for the composer's widow. Having received the remainder of the commission, Constanze now had to promote the work as Mozart's so that she could continue to receive royalties from its publication and subsequent performances. And so came the flurry of half-truths and myths which made this piece the most mysterious of the choral canon.

The Collegium Musicum Choir will be performing these exemplary works, accompanied by members of the Australia Ensemble in the orchestra, at the Sir John Clancy Auditorium on Sunday 28th May 2017 at 5pm.