

August Events

Australia Ensemble @UNSW
Free lunch hour concert
Tuesday August 9, 2016
1.10 - 2.00pm
Leighton Hall, Scientia Building
Sculthorpe: *Irkanda IV* for flute and strings
Poulenc: *Sonata* for clarinet & bassoon
Beethoven: *Trio* for flute, bassoon & piano

Free vocal masterclass
Thursday August 11, 2016
1.10 - 2.00pm
Leighton Hall, Scientia Building
Guest soprano Sara Macliver works with two young singers of UNSW
Free, all welcome

Australia Ensemble @UNSW
Subscription Concert 4, 2016
Saturday August 13, 2016 at 8pm
Sir John Clancy Auditorium
Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird
CPE Bach: Flute Quartet Wq94
Schubert: *Der Hirt auf dem Felsen*
Messiaen: *Le merle noir*
Munro: *Three Birds* (first performance)
Beethoven: *Septet* in E flat Op.20

www.music.unsw.edu.au

Ian Munro's birds

ANDREW FORD

There are some composers who, when faced with the prospect of writing a vocal work, cast around for texts to set; and there are others, voracious readers, who have a collection of such texts at the ready should anyone ask for a song or two. Ian Munro falls into the second category.

'Words and music go together like any two good things you can think of,' he says. 'As far as we know, they've done so since mankind's minds coalesced. I love words and I love music. When they come together, I think they make something new, and I like that too.'



Above - European blackbird; below left - Currawong

When Norma Hawkins first approached the Australia Ensemble with the idea of commissioning a piece in memory of her late husband, Bruce, Munro was the composer she had in mind. Mrs Hawkins is a fan; she has heard most of his pieces and can discuss her favourites. It helps, perhaps, that the composer and commissioner share a love of Schubert. Speaking of his CD of completions of unfinished piano sonatas, Mrs Hawkins admires Munro's chutzpah in taking on a project that would have daunted many, and she hears some of Schubert's qualities especially an easy, consoling lyricism – in Munro's own music.



Bruce Hawkins was a structural engineer who taught for two decades in the School of Building at UNSW. In 1980, when the Australia Ensemble was founded (as the University of New South Wales Ensemble), Bruce and Norma Hawkins were among the first subscribers. Munro joined the Ensemble in 2000 and is well aware of the importance of its subscribers.

'We have a remarkable audience,' he says. 'People like Norma have remained loyal to us for years, which means we must be pleasing her and others, and that is a relationship that is worth more than any arts council grant.'

Munro's new piece consists of three songs about birds to words by Emily Dickinson, Wallace Stevens and Judith Wright. The music is typical of Munro in its direct simplicity, and the composer admits that there is a particular pleasure in responding to private commissions such as this.

'I do enjoy writing to commissions when I get to know the people for whom I'm writing and understanding their reasons for doing so. It helps me, in any case, to overcome the dreaded blank page stasis, to have an idea of what the music might be for, and what it might be attempting to convey.'

Although on this occasion the commissioner made no suggestions regarding instrumentation or subject matter – she didn't even set out to commission songs – she has been delighted to discover the coincidence of an avian theme. As something of an activist, she has spent years involved in a campaign for biodiversity in Sydney's inner west. The result is a new habitat for blue wrens and other birds at the back of her Glebe home.

'I just walk out of the gate,' she says, as though she can barely believe it, 'and it's right there.'

Under the circumstances, it would have been too much of a coincidence had Munro chosen Wright's poem, 'The Blue Wrens and the Butcher-bird'. As it is, his setting of Wright's 'Currawong' (complete with a recording of the bird itself) relates to a bird for which Mrs Hawkins has less fondness. Still, that choice, too, is significant, as Munro explains.

'When I was working up a concept for the piece, having already written my setting of Stevens's poem "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird", I was wondering what American blackbirds sounded like. As I was sitting outside the chancellery one day, the currawongs of UNSW kept telling me: don't bother with all that, listen to us! So I wrote about currawongs too, and have included the local calls in the song as a connection to our campus life, and to the university that has kept bringing us together for the seventeen years I've been part of it.'

Judith Wright has long been a popular poet for Australian composers, and Emily Dickinson's words have drawn musical responses from all over the world. But although Wallace Stevens's poetry often makes reference to music, there seems to be something in his writing that has deterred composers.

'Stevens is a poet I love,' says Munro, 'but I admit that I find him more obscure than T.S. Eliot, and less generous with clues as to the meaning of his allusions and symbols. Yet, there's something in the sheer sound of even his most impenetrable constructions that almost forces you to give in to those inflections, rhythms and colours while putting understanding on the back burner. That appeals to me.'

'I respond to phrases that seem to me to have a magic, or aura, about them, I suppose, and I realise that that involves a very personal response. Stevens writes about the nature of being in a highly analytical way but couches it in a sequence of superb metaphors with a common cynosure, which might almost prescribe a musical form.'

'We know that he was fond of music and invited musical settings of his words, because he said and wrote so, whereas we know that Judith Wright was famously grumpy about settings of hers. I don't think that matters at all.'

In the period following these interviews and articles, it has become apparent that Ian Munro has not been able to secure the permission of the publisher to use the Wallace Stevens text in his new work. Rather than challenging any legal issues, Munro has opted for the more time-consuming but gentler solution of resetting the movement with different lyrics. The song has been recast with a text Munro compiled by collecting haiku about birds by the great haiku master Matsuo Bashō. He is grateful for the generous assistance of former member of the Burgundian Consort and pianist Mirei Ballinger, who provided invaluable guidance with translation and explanation of these texts.



Ian Munro's work Three Birds will be given its first performance by the Australia Ensemble @UNSW on Saturday August 13 at 8pm, the final work of the first half of the program Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird, in the Sir John Clancy Auditorium UNSW.

In the dressing room...

WITH FIONA CAMPBELL

Everybody knows Sara Macliver; the glamorous, svelte, silver-toned soprano, an accomplished musician with numerous recordings to her name, an icon in our Australian music scene. Indeed, anyone who has listened to ABC Classic FM over the past decade will be familiar with her stunning sound and effortless musicianship. What you may not know, however, are some home truths about this human nightingale, which I have discovered over many shared hours together rehearsing, chatting, laughing and generally carrying on in the dressing room.

Recently, I asked her what made performing chamber music so special, especially with the exceptionally fine bunch who make up the Australia Ensemble. "I think the best thing about it is, because it's a small group, it's the ultimate collaborative experience. There is an opportunity for everyone to give input. With that, you get a greater understanding of the piece, you can really go into enormous detail and it then gives me an insight into what each instrument is trying to say."

In this programme, the Australia Ensemble will be performing the world premiere of *Three Birds*, a work commissioned from their very own esteemed pianist and composer Ian Munro. I asked Macliver what pressure or extra joy perhaps, was added to the process, when the composer was present?

"I just think that's such an enormous privilege to be present with the composer and to be doing it for the first time. It's really exciting! Together we are hearing this unique, new creation and we are creating it, hopefully, how Ian hears it in his head."

Being a new work, the score only seen by a few people in the world to date, I was keen to know if it was well written for the voice. "Munro writes beautifully for the voice and the way the instruments and voice mimic birdsong is so clever. I think the audience will be enchanted with this set of three songs and I'm delighted to be performing a work written by my dear friend and colleague."

Munro's work uses texts by the poets Emily Dickinson, Judith Wright and the seventeenth century Japanese master of haiku poetry, Matsuo Bashō. "The world of Bashō is absolutely captivating. I looked for all the haiku relating to birds that I could find. So many! And so good!" Munro enthused.

Of all the singers in the world, I asked the composer why he chose Ms. Macliver? "Sara's voice is unique and it's more to do with the particular pleasure of writing for people you know and love. Once you play with someone, you have their voice in your head - when you're composing you want to hear that note, as sung by Sara."

Like many a great musician, Sara has a fine wit and a wicked sense of humour, which is accompanied by

the most delightful, bell-like laugh. A consummate professional, Macliver is often asked how she manages to combine motherhood and a career that takes her all over the country. I didn't particularly want to address this here, because we all know how challenging the balance of work and family can be, but the truth is that her family is such an integral part of her life and who she is as a person. Sara is a devoted wife and mother, generous, loving and attentive. Quite possibly the most difficult part of her job is being separated from her family, except when she's with me and then it's total fun.



Guest soprano Sara Macliver [photo: Rhydian Lewis]

So although her voice stands on its own merit and is very fine, it is made all the sweeter to me and hopefully now to you, knowing that the human voice is an extension of the soul, hers is a beautiful one, through and through.

There is never a night I would not go out of my way to hear this lady sing or the Australia Ensemble perform. Include a world premiere by the astoundingly talented Ian Munro and some classic Schubert lied *Shepherd on the Rock* and your night will surely be luminous, transfigured even.

Sara Macliver will perform Ian Munro's new work *Three Birds* and Schubert's *The Shepherd on the Rock* on Saturday August 13 at 8pm in the Sir John Clancy Auditorium UNSW.

Our thanks to mezzo-soprano and friend of the Australia Ensemble Fiona Campbell for interviewing Sara Macliver for this article.



A life remembered

On Friday July 29, members of UNSW's chamber choir, the Burgundian Consort, venture to the campus of UNSW Canberra (ADFA) to perform at a conference celebrating the life and legacy of historian Charles Bean run by the Australian Centre for the Study of Armed Conflict and Society (ACSACS). A celebrated World War I correspondent and historian, Bean played a large role in the establishment of the Australian War Memorial, and was editor of *The Official History of Australia in the War 1914-1918*. He was often credited with the popularisation of the ANZAC legend, having gone ashore on April 25 1915, where he remained until December 17 1915. He provided press reports of the Australian experience, including his time spent on the Western Front.

Australia Ensemble pianist and leading composer, Ian Munro, was invited to contribute to the celebrations, writing a new work specifically for the occasion on a text of Charles Bean. He chose to write for mixed choir and piano especially for the Burgundian Consort, which will be accompanied by UNSW alumnus (and Australia Ensemble page turner) Harrison Collins. The work, *Non nobis*, also includes an adaptation of 'In Memoriam' by William B Beattie. Keep an eye on the Australia Ensemble website for updates of this special performance.

<http://www.music.unsw.edu.au/australia-ensemble>



Historian and war correspondent Charles E.W. Bean, whose life and legacy will be celebrated in a new work by Ian Munro [portrait by George Lambert, 1924]



A very welcome guest

Although very familiar to the Australia Ensemble's subscription season audience, bassoonist Andrew Barnes rarely has the opportunity to perform elsewhere on campus at UNSW. This month, he will join with the Australia Ensemble for the lunchtime concert for works by Poulenc and Beethoven. The Poulenc Sonata brings Andrew Barnes together with Associate Artist David Griffiths on clarinet for an unusually scored but very brief three movement work, abounding with virtuosic flourishes and playfulness.

The program also includes Sculthorpe's *Irkanda IV* for flute and strings, and concludes with Beethoven's Trio in G WoO37 for flute, bassoon and piano, providing a more substantial opportunity to enjoy Andrew's magnificent playing.

As always, the lunchtime concert is free and open to all - Tuesday August 9, 2016 at 1.10pm, Leighton Hall of the John Niland Scientia Building UNSW

Andrew Barnes will also perform with the Australia Ensemble in Beethoven's Septet on Saturday August 13 at 8pm in the Sir John Clancy Auditorium.

Career on the rise

Those who enjoyed the performance of soprano and UNSW alumna Sarah Ampil in the Collegium Musicum Choir's May performance of Handel's *Messiah* may like to hear of further successes of this young singer. A month following the UNSW performance, Sarah performed in the semifinals of the IFAC Australian Singing Competition, and although did not reach the final was awarded the Lana Woolf Prize. In the Sydney Eisteddfod, Sarah won First Place in both the Intermediate Operatic Aria and Oratorio sections. Leading on from this success, on Thursday July 14 she was named the winner of the Joan Sutherland Memorial Award in the Senior Vocal Scholarship for singers 21-25 years of age, receiving \$4000 for tuition in singing and languages.

Sarah has also recently performed Handel's *Saul* with the Leichhardt Espresso Chorus, Haydn's *The Creation* for the Box Hill Chorale in Melbourne, is a Young Artist with Pacific Opera, and as recipient of the 2015 Sydney Opera House Opera Award performed in a masterclass led by renowned soprano Renée Fleming. Certainly one to keep a keen eye on!



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