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AMPlify Indigenous Composer Initiative in full swing

by [Australian Music Centre](#)



AMPlify Indigenous Composer Initiative is now in full swing, and five participants have been confirmed: Rhyan Clapham, Brenda Gifford, Tim Gray, Troy Russell and Elizabeth Sheppard. Representing different communities from WA and NSW, the youngest of the participants are in their mid-20s, the eldest in their mid-60s.

[AMPlify Indigenous Composer Initiative](#) is a pilot project, launched in Spring 2016 by the Australian Music Centre together with Moogahlin Performing Arts, APRA AMCOS, the Australian National University School of Music and Ensemble Offspring, with the aim of supporting emerging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander composers in new music and jazz. A part of [the AMPlify framework](#) of artist development programs, the Indigenous Composer Initiative takes place in NSW and ACT over 2016 and 2017.

The first session with participants was organised in mid-November at the Eora College for Aboriginal Visual and Performing Arts in Sydney, consisting of introductions, lively discussion and sharing of ideas, as well as practical information about the program.

Facilitators [Chris Sainsbury](#) and Kevin Hunt explained the overall project, and details were discussed, including intentions and possible outcomes by individual participants present at the meeting. Participants decided on instrumental forces they wanted to use in their project, guided partly by the core line-up of the program partner Ensemble Offspring (flute, clarinet, cello and percussion). Facilitators gave presentations about the use of musical materials and possible techniques.

As an example of the way the initiative is being directed and shaped by participating artists, an interesting discussion took place about the role of language in the project, which initially had been intended to have instrumental music as its focus. Several participants felt that the use of Aboriginal language in works would be important, especially in these current days of language reclamation. Both Elizabeth Sheppard and Rhyan Clapham both talked about looking at language as something that in fact could direct instrumental content in terms of rhythm, phrasing, tone, etc. The group also discussed ways in which the instrumentalists may be instructed to sing if need be, or writing themselves as composers 'in' the work with the intention of joining the performance.

AMPlify Indigenous Composer Initiative will continue with one-on-one sessions with Chris and Kevin towards the end of 2017, with participants working on several pieces of music, of up to 10 minutes in duration.

AMPLify ICI participants

Rhyan Clapham's family is from Murrawarri and Ngemba country in Brewarrina NSW. Rhyan has completed Bachelor of Music at the University of NSW, and an Indigenous Studies Honours (focusing on Aboriginal hip hop music) in 2015. A rapper and drummer, he has performed for various events such as Kevin Hunt's 'Our Music' concert at the Sydney Conservatorium, at Yabun NCIE, UNSW corporate and academic events, Koori Radio events and at NAIDOC. You can listen to Rhyan's work on [his SoundCloud page](#) - see also [profile on the UNSW website](#).

Brenda Gifford is an Aboriginal musician, originally from Wreck Bay, South Coast NSW, Yuin nation, with twenty years of experience. She was saxophonist in the band Mixed Relations and has a close relationship with fellow musician and friend Bart Willoughby. She has toured nationally to Aboriginal communities around Australia and internationally to Native American communities and the Pacific Islands. More recently she has worked as a curator with the National Film and Sound Archive.

Tim Gray, Gumbaynggirr and Wiradjuri, has a reggae/ska band called Green Hand Band, in which he plays the keyboard. He came out of the emerging artists program at Gadigal/Koori Radio and was also volunteer broadcaster at Koori Radio. He sings in a group called Voices Carry, lead by Sydney choral director Tania Bowra. [Read his profile](#) on the Koori radio website.

Troy Russell, Gamiliroi and Biripi of NSW, plays bass, drums and guitar. He has played long-term with Walangari Kantawarra's group [the Black Turtles](#) and appeared at most major Aboriginal music festivals. He also plays with the Green Hand Band. His other credits include film-making, and composing music for his films. At present he teaches art and music at Eora College in Redfern.

Elizabeth Sheppard explores and expresses her Nyoongar Yamatji (WA) Aboriginal heritage and Aboriginal issues through music, art and poetry. Born in Melbourne, raised in Adelaide, and now living on Dharug Burrumattagul country, her deep community engagement with academia, Aboriginal Elders, local councils and reconciliation groups through music, writing, art and informative public seminars, spans cultural and geographical distance.

Facilitators and instigators of the ICI program are the Sydney composer and jazz musician **Kevin Hunt**, and the Central Coast based composer/guitarist [Chris Sainsbury](#). Chris, who teaches composition at ANU in Canberra, descends from the Aboriginal people of Sydney, the Dharug (also commonly called Eora). He originally realised the need for the supporting program for Aboriginal composers after observing Aboriginal musicians especially in the context of Eora College in Redfern. Kevin, as a musician who had been living and working with Aboriginal people in Sydney over decades, was the obvious co-facilitator of the program.

> [More information about the AMPLify framework](#) of artist development programs

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