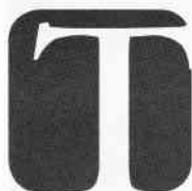




# ANCIENT MELODIES IN A DAY OF OUR MUSIC

Celebrate Gadigal heritage through concerts, talks and discussions dedicated to exploring how knowledge of traditional Aboriginal music can help broaden our understanding and appreciation of indigenous culture.



**THE SYDNEY CONSERVATORIUM** of Music and the Royal Botanic Gardens are located on some of the traditional Bora grounds owned by the Gadigal people. Initiation and other ceremonies, and musical celebrations were held on this land for many thousands of years before white settle-

ment. In an acknowledgement of Gadigal heritage, the Conservatorium will host the first annual Our Music Day in June. The event will mark the start of National Aboriginal and Islanders Week in July, organised by the National Aboriginal and Islanders Day Observance Committee.

The Our Music Day is the initiative of well-known jazz pianist and composer, Kevin Hunt. The Conservatorium has been central to Kevin's life and work. Throughout his career, he has returned to his alma mater every ten years or so, to refresh and revitalise his musical knowledge and skills and to study widely and deeply, first as an undergraduate, then for a Master's degree and now as a PhD candidate.

Hunt is currently working on a relationship between some of the oldest melodies on the planet (some conceivably 20,000 – 30,000 years old) and one of the newest instruments, the revolutionary 102-key piano designed and built by Stuart & Sons Wayne Stuart.

'What lit the fuse' of this project for Hunt was Paul Grabowsky's work, 'Crossing Roper Bar', a fusion of experimental, contemporary jazz with ancient Yolgnu manikay, or song cycles, from Ngukurr in South East Arnhem land. Grabowsky's Australian Art Orchestra joined with the Young Wagilaks for a series of workshops and ultimately recorded a CD which was chosen last year

for the New York City Jazz Records 'Best of 2011'. Hunt believes Grabowsky succeeded because he took the time needed to sit with the elders and listen to them, to understand the deeply significant ideas and philosophy lying beneath the music.

It is perhaps not surprising for ancient melodies to survive the impact of white settlement in the remote communities that live by the Roper River, which floods and isolates them regularly for half the year. Survival of the tribal lore and traditions of the original inhabitants of the Sydney region is a much more remote possibility, but even here, the ancient voices still make themselves heard.

The historian, Keith Vincent Smith, made a remarkable discovery at the British Library in 2011 – when Bennelong and Yemmerrawanie travelled to England with Governor Phillip in 1792, their chant, 'Burra-Bulla', was transcribed by a listener and preserved for posterity. The Darug elder and language teacher, Richard Green, sang this and two other haunting melodies at the Conservatorium last year, with Hunt's specially composed accompaniment on the Stuart & Sons piano. There will be another performance of this unforgettable work for audiences at the Our Music Day on 30 June.

Hunt has also been working with indigenous music and art students from the Paakantji and Ngiyampaa language groups at the Menindee Central School in the far west of NSW. On a recent visit, art students created beautiful painted panels to decorate the Stuart piano, while the music students participated in composing the 'Painted Piano Blues', which they will come to Sydney to sing at the Our Music Day.

The Our Music Day is not simply about performance, it will also be a symposium, inviting the expression of many different

PHOTOS: Dan White



points of view on the controversial matter of how best to celebrate and preserve Australia's indigenous culture. There are clearly limits to what well meaning idealists can achieve. The term 'born-again blacks', coined by Peter McKenzie of the La Perouse Lands Council, is a memorable rebuke.

Great journeys begin with small steps. Hunt appreciates the 'repatriation' of three songs will neither undo past wrongs, nor will it bring a whole culture back to life. It may do something to interest the next generation in what has been lost, and generate some new shoots of respect, regret and re-evaluation. The new dynamic he brings to the project is the radical new sounds of the Stuart piano, arguably the most important step forward in piano technology since the development of the Steinway more than 150 years ago.

Hunt's own musical career has been an extraordinary journey across many musical genres. Born in Penshurst in 1961, the son of a one-time boy soprano, pianist and vaudevillian turned banker and a top accompanist from Brisbane, he loved music from an early age, playing in brass bands and rock'n'roll groups at school. Hunt enrolled in the Jazz Studies course under Don Burrows in 1981 to complete a two-year Diploma, but like many, started working in his second year and was a full-time performer up to 1992. Then he came back to the Conservatorium to complete a B.Mus. (Composition) degree with Martin Wesley-Smith and Trevor Pearce. In the middle of that course, Hunt had an opportunity to study with the legendary Josef Zawinul in Vienna, 'one of the great jazz performers of all time', who had played with Miles Davis and helped create 'jazz fusion', founded the group Weather Report and composed 'Birdland'. Hunt spent a life-changing three days playing with Zawinul and went on to other adventures in Europe, attending the Chopin Conservatorium for a Composition Course in Warsaw and then took a Polish band to Miami to work on a ship for six months.

Hunt intended to return to the Conservatorium to resume his composition studies, but received an irresistible offer of a full-time gig as Don Burrows' pianist, first touring China with his quintet, then travelling with Don as a duo for the next eight years, 'living out of a suitcase' but learning an immense amount on the way.

Then it was back to the Conservatorium again in 2002, this time to complete a Master's degree in transferring classical music scores to jazz, under the supervision of Associate Profes-

sor Stephanie McCallum. Hunt's special subject was Debussy's *Bergamasque*, which he effectively deconstructed in re-writing the work for jazz trio. He explains the technique as 'looking vertically into the score' (in contrast to a normal line of writing or music, which is horizontal). It took him right back to the source of the music, to look at the choices Debussy made, when composing it.

In 2005 Hunt married music therapist and flautist, Maria Lopes, and studied with Dick Montz who was Head of Jazz History at the Conservatorium. Since then he has been with Bill Motzing, one of the institution's lecturers in Jazz History, especially up to 1950.

Hunt's contact with indigenous life and culture goes back to 1983, when he first lived in Redfern and became part of the left wing Catholic community with Father Ted Kennedy and 'Mum' Shirl. 'I worked as a music teacher in prisons and my house was a homeless persons' shelter.'

All of this experience coalesced when Hunt embarked on his PhD project, generously funded by Robert and David Albert of Albert Music, at the start of 2010. Wayne Stuart pointed out it was not going to be enough to play established works on the new piano; it would need a whole new repertoire specially composed for it to make full use of its potential. So Hunt called his old friends in Redfern and began a search for any music from before white settlement; a search which has already produced some extraordinary results and may well continue for many years to come, given the enthusiastic response from indigenous and non-indigenous performers and audiences.

All music has a source. It is specific to the culture from which it springs and some aspect of which it expresses, but once it is loose on the air waves, there is no telling who will hear it, whistle it, sing it, adapt it or fashion it into something new that still has recognisable echoes of its origins. Ownership of music is a very complex subject; arguably, all music is 'Our Music'. So why not spend a day celebrating it? □

#### **MICK LE MOIGNAN**

**Our Music – Performing Place, Listening to Sydney**

**Saturday 30 June, 9am-5pm**

**Sydney Conservatorium of Music, Macquarie Street, Sydney**

**Free entry, registration required**

**Registration via [con.rsvp@sydney.edu.au](mailto:con.rsvp@sydney.edu.au)**