



Thursday 21 January 2021 at 8pm
York Theatre, Seymour Theatre Centre

Presented by the Sydney Festival

Cycles

Sydney Chamber Choir

Luke Byrne, Jem Harding *piano*

Jess Ciampa, Josh Hill *percussion*

Sam Allchurch *conductor*

Program

Minga bagan (2020) World Premiere Performance	Brenda Gifford
The Land is Healed Ban.garay! (2014)	Paul Stanhope
The Passing of the Year (2000) <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Invocation2. The narrow bud opens her beauties to the sun3. Answer July4. Hot sun, cool fire5. Ah, Sun-flower!6. Adieu! farewell earth's bliss7. Ring out, wild bells	Jonathan Dove
I Have Not Your Dreaming (2005)	Paul Stanhope
Praise the Lord (2019)	Brooke Shelley
Flower Songs: No. 2 Tranquil (1987)	Ross Edwards
Invocation and Dance (1986, rev. 1989)	David Conte

ABOUT THE MUSIC

BRENDA GIFFORD **Minga bagan**

Brenda Gifford is a Yuin woman, originally from Wreck Bay on the South Coast of NSW. A composer and classically trained saxophonist, pianist and teacher, she has twenty years of extensive experience as a musician. A First Nations person, her culture is the basis of her arts practice.

Gifford studied composition at ANU and is currently a participant in the Sydney Conservatorium of Music's Composing Women program. She has been commissioned by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, Canberra International Music Festival and the Four Winds Festival, and is Resident Composer with Ensemble Offspring. Her ARIA-nominated album *Music for the Dreaming* is available on the ABC Classic label.

Gifford was a member of the band Mixed Relations with Bart Willoughby from No Fixed Address. She has toured extensively around Australia and internationally to Native American communities and the Pacific Islands. She worked with Kev Carmody on his album *Eulogy (for a black person)*, playing saxophone on the track 'Blood Red Rose'. She has also conducted over 100 interviews and oral histories with Aboriginal musicians and has curated notes and blogs.

Minga Bagan (Mother Earth) was commissioned by Sydney Chamber Choir and this is its world premiere performance.

PAUL STANHOPE **The Land is Healed | Ban.garay!**

Paul Stanhope, a former Music Director of Sydney Chamber Choir, is an award-winning composer with a keen sense of music's power to communicate and connect. His works are often grounded in a sense of place – from his *Geography Songs*, premiered by Sydney Chamber Choir in 1997, to *Exile Lamentations*, reflecting upon the experience of displacement, homelessness and banishment in the context of Palestine. 'My music,' he writes, 'presents the listener with an optimistic, personal geography ... whether this is a reaction to the elemental aspects of the universe (both the celestial and terrestrial) or the throbbing energy of the inner-city.'

His music-drama *Jandamarra: Sing for the Country* was premiered by singers and dancers from the Bunuba Community of the southern West Kimberley, along with Gondwana Choirs and the Sydney Symphony Orchestra in 2014. Setting a text by Steve Hawke, written in close collaboration with members of the Bunuba people, it tells the story of the Bunuba warrior Jandamarra who led his people in a war of resistance against the British colonialists in the 19th century. The chorus *Ban.garay!* tells of a moment of triumph for the Bunuba people, as Jandamarra sings the Snake Spirit Yilimbirri Unggud back to his spring: the country healed through the power of song.

Ban.garay!*

**He is back!*

Women in tears and men in chains
A time of deepest, deepest woe
Like a spear across the sky, a spirit cloud
Omen of triumph, beacon of hope
Ban.garay, the land is healed
The raii* now dance their joy
Yilimbirri's home again, ban.garay.

**Spirit beings who live
around water*

No-one had sung a snake before
The Unggud* home, the land restored
Jalgangurru*, Jandamarra
Magic man, man of power
You sang Yilimbirri to his spring
Ban.garay, the land is healed
The raii now dance their joy
Yilimbirri's home again, ban.garay.

**Creator spirit
Magic man, man of power

In times of woe our hearts are eased
The balance of the land restored
The water once more is sweet
This land of ours is singing
Ban.garay, the land is healed,
The raii now dance their joy
Yilimbirri's home again, ban.garay.

JONATHAN DOVE **The Passing of the Year**

English composer Jonathan Dove had an unusual path to success: not only was his first major international hit an opera, it was a comic opera, *Flight*, premiered at Glyndebourne in 1998. His love of the voice and his understanding of its potential had been developed while working as a pianist, accompanying singers in restaurants as well as playing for opera rehearsals. Opera continues to be a major focus –

he has written nearly 30 operatic works – but he is particularly interested in taking opera outside the theatre into new contexts, including two operas specifically for television, two for church and cathedral performances, and several family operas (with audience participation). Music, for Dove, is about communicating, creating wonder and enriching lives. Those qualities are abundantly in evidence in his choral song cycle *The Passing of the Year*.

It's an ambiguous title – is this a celebration of the seasons, à la Vivaldi, or a lament for another year gone? – and that ambiguity contributes to the music's extraordinary intensity and beauty. The opening *Invocation*, setting a single line of text by William Blake, pulses with life: multiple layers of rhythm (recalling music of John Adams) suggest something below the surface, waiting to emerge.

O Earth, O Earth, return!

Dove continues with Blake in the second movement, giving us a moment of magical stillness, as if all of creation holds its breath while a single flower opens its petals at the life-giving touch of the sun. As Spring gives way to Summer, we hear the medieval tune *Summer is i-cumen in* in an extravagant outpouring of delight.

The narrow bud opens her beauties to
The sun, and love runs in her thrilling veins;
Blossoms hang round the brows of morning, and
Flourish down the bright cheek of modest eve,
Till clust'ring Summer breaks forth into singing,
And feather'd clouds strew flowers round her head.

The spirits of the air live on the smells
Of fruit; and joy, with pinions light, roves round
The gardens, or sits singing in the trees.

Summer is icumen in
Lhude sing cuccu

*Summer is a-coming in,
Loudly sing 'Cuckoo!'*

The third movement, *Answer July*, is a complete change of gear. Emily Dickinson's poem begins with a challenge: Summer, where are you? Summer (July, of course, in the northern hemisphere) answers with a challenge of her own: Yes, but where was Spring? And so on through the seasons – backwards! Spring asks after Winter's snows; Winter wants to know what happened to Autumn's harvests. Finally the Year settles the matter, declaring herself the provider of all.

Answer July –
Where is the Bee –
Where is the Blush –
Where is the Hay?

Ah, said July –
Where is the Seed –
Where is the Bud –
Where is the May –
Answer Thee – Me –

Nay – said the May –
Show me the Snow –
Show me the Bells –
Show me the Jay!

Quibbled the Jay –
Where be the Maize –
Where be the Haze –
Where be the Bur?
Here – said the year –

Hot Sun, Cool Fire shows us another side of summer. The poem comes from a 16th-century play by George Peele called *The Love of King David and Fair Bethsabe*: it is a song sung by Bethsabe (Bathsheba) in the play's opening scene, as she bathes in the cool spring water, under the lascivious spying gaze of David. The story comes from the Old Testament; David's lust will lead to a sordid string of lies and cover-ups culminating in the murder of Bathsheba's husband, but that is all still to come. Here we apparently have just the young woman, sensuously enjoying the play of the sun's heat on her skin – but the lyrics, as Carol Rumens wrote in an article for *The Guardian*, 'have an incandescent quality appropriate to this erotic scenario, seeming to fuse the excitement of both the voyeur and the young woman who is his target, and who feels acutely aware of her own attractiveness and vulnerability.' Dove captures this in his music, with languorous vocal lines and a rippling piano accompaniment so lush it seems immoral.

Hot sun, cool fire, temper'd with sweet air,
Black shade, fair nurse, shadow my white hair:
Shine, sun; burn, fire; breathe, air, and ease me;
Black shade, fair nurse, shroud me and please me:
Shadow, my sweet nurse, keep me from burning,
Make not my glad cause, cause of [my] mourning.
 Let not my beauty's fire
 Enflame unstaïd desire,
 Nor pierce any bright eye
 That wand'reth lightly.

The next movement *Ah, Sun-flower!*, moves desire into a different space: the aching yearning of a weary soul for the restful sleep of death. William Blake's poem takes us inside the pain of the sunflower, condemned to follow the sun's beauty as it rises and sets each day, but never permitted to reach the truer, lasting, beauty of

eternity. Dove's music here manages to convey both movement and stillness. The piano gives us two chords which rock gently back and forth throughout the entire movement: harmonic stasis, while the rhythm continues to move us forwards. In the voices, Dove uses canonic writing – the same tune sung by all eight parts, overlapping as each begins one after the other – to convey the endless round of the sunflower's daily journey.

Ah, Sun-flower! weary of time,
Who countest the steps of the Sun
Seeking after that sweet golden clime
Where the traveller's journey is done:

Where the Youth pined away with desire,
And the pale Virgin shrouded in snow
Arise from their graves, and aspire
Where my Sun-flower wishes to go.

Adieu! Farewell Earth's Bliss, like *Hot Sun, Cool Fire*, comes from an Elizabethan play: this time, a masque-like work by Thomas Nashe, entitled *Summer's Last Will and Testament*. The play is, ostensibly, 'A Pleasant Comedy', but in amongst the narrator's clownlike banter and razor-sharp political satire (which almost got the play banned), the central character is a clinically depressed and dying Summer, looking for a worthy heir among his fellow seasons. *Adieu! farewell earth's bliss* is sung at Summer's request as light entertainment (or, as he puts it, 'to weary out the time'): a 'doleful ditty...that may complain my near-approaching death'. Dove's musical setting has the slow, solemn cadence of a funeral procession; one half of the choir chants the refrain 'Lord, have mercy on us', over and over again, while the other half exposes the bleak reality of human mortality. It is surely no coincidence that Nashe wrote his play in the wake of an outbreak of plague and a devastating drought that almost drained the Thames, nor that Dove dedicated this work to the memory of his mother, who had died very young.

Adieu! farewell earth's bliss!
This world uncertain is:
Fond are life's lustful joys,
Death proves them all but toys.
None from his darts can fly:
I am sick, I must die –
Lord, have mercy on us!

Rich men, trust not in wealth,
Gold cannot buy you health;
Physic himself must fade;
All things to end are made;
The plague full swift goes by:
I am sick, I must die –
Lord, have mercy on us!

Beauty is but a flower
 Which wrinkles will devour:
 Brightness falls from the air;
 Queens have died young and fair;
 Dust hath closed Helen's eye:
 I am sick, I must die –
 Lord, have mercy on us!

The cycle finishes with verses from Tennyson's visionary *Ring Out, Wild Bells*, a plea for justice, compassion and peace as the old year dies and a new year is born. Somehow, despite the obvious and sad fact that buying a fresh calendar has never yet resolved the miseries of the world, Dove's fiercely, defiantly joyous bells have such unstoppable momentum that maybe, just maybe, this time it will.

O Earth, O Earth, return!

Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky,	Ring out the want, the care, the sin,
The flying cloud, the frosty light:	The faithless coldness of the time;
The year is dying in the night;	Ring out, ring out my mournful
Ring out, wild bells, and let him die.	rhymes,
	But ring the fuller minstrel in.
Ring out the old, ring in the new,	
Ring, happy bells, across the snow:	Ring out old shapes of foul disease;
The year is going, let him go;	Ring out the narrowing lust of gold;
Ring out the false, ring in the true.	Ring out the thousand wars of old,
	Ring in the thousand years of peace.
Ring out the grief that saps the	
mind,	
For those that here we see no more;	
Ring out the feud of rich and poor,	
Ring in redress to all mankind.	

PAUL STANHOPE **I Have Not Your Dreaming**

I Have Not Your Dreaming is a setting of poetry by the self-described 'Australian bush poet' Margaret Glendenning. The composer writes:

'Known earlier in her career as Kath Walker, Oodgeroo Noonuccal took her indigenous name in order to reclaim her heritage. Oodgeroo became well known as an Aboriginal leader, advocate and speaker but above all an eloquent poet. Margaret Glendenning's poem *I Hear the Songs* is a tribute to Oodgeroo. It expresses a yearning to understand indigenous culture with Oodgeroo acting as a sort of medium. Glendenning was one of many students of Oodgeroo, and her poem is a fitting tribute to a truly inspiring figure.

‘In setting this poem for four-part treble choir, I have attempted to portray something of the sense of yearning felt by the poet in the slow outer sections of the piece, whilst the exuberant dance-like music of the middle underlines the more energized character of birds in flight and a “quicksilver dance of stars”.’

I have not your dreaming, oodgeroo
know not the tales your people knew
vague yearning stirs awareness through
the lines you’ve penned, and clearly
I hear the songs tall red-gums sigh
to music scored on wind tossed sky
and in the mournful curlew’s cry
I feel the old ones near me

sweet poetry of ibis flight
uluru’s age sculptured height
quicksilver dance of stars at night
bewitch my heart, beguiling
with a sense that time and space have slipped
brown hand, white hand, in friendship gripped
overpowering scent of eucalypt
the spirits gently smiling

— *Margaret Glendenning*
First published in Moongalba: Poems in Honour of
Oodgeroo, edited by Janelle Evans
Brisbane: Ibis editions Australien, 2001

BROOKE SHELLEY **Praise the Lord**

Brooke Shelley holds a Bachelor of Music (Hons) in Composition from the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, and a Master of Music in Advanced Musical Studies, majoring in Historical Musicology, from Royal Holloway, University of London. In addition to her training on piano and harpsichord, she has extensive experience as a choral singer, and this is reflected in her composition portfolio which is dominated by choral works for the liturgy. She has been interviewed on a number of ABC Radio National programs, including *The Rhythm Divine*, and *The Spirit of Things*. Although classically trained, she has always loved popular music, particularly Scandinavian metal music. She formed the band Resonaxis as a way of combining metal and renaissance music with the improvisations of renowned Australian organist David Drury. (Resonaxis was perhaps the only band in the world with a classical organist.)

The composer writes:

Praise the Lord was commissioned by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM, a parishioner and Parish Lay Reader at St James' Church, King Street Sydney. Having heard my other choral works, Michael approached me to see if I would compose a piece for his 80th birthday using the text from Psalm 147, verses 1 and 7. He gave me a selection of English translations of the text from which to choose, and I settled (unknowingly at the time) on his favourite version, that by Myles Coverdale (1488–1569). Michael asked for the composition to be joyful, since he thought it was rather a joyful and 'good thing' to be reaching 80 years of age!

I have heard many sermons, addresses and seminars presented by Michael, and I have always been struck by his understanding of text and ritual. His delivery of text is deliberate – words are not glossed over. I hoped my treatment of the text in this piece reflected his deliberate intention, and that the music adequately conveys the ecstatic joy (and relief) of reaching 80 years of age.

Praise the Lord, for it is a good thing
to sing praises unto our God.
Yea, a joyful and pleasant thing it is to be thankful.
O sing unto the Lord with thanksgiving,
sing praises upon the harp unto our God.

ROSS EDWARDS **Flower Songs: II. Tranquil**

One of Australia's best known and most performed composers, Ross Edwards has created a distinctive sound world based on deep ecology and awareness of the need to reconnect music with elemental forces and restore its traditional association with ritual. His music, universal in that it is concerned with age-old mysteries surrounding humanity, is at the same time connected to its roots in Australia, whose cultural diversity it celebrates, and from whose natural environment it draws inspiration, especially birdsong and the mysterious patterns and drones of insects. As a composer living and working on the Pacific Rim, he is conscious of the exciting potential of this vast region.

Ross has composed prolifically in most musical genres. Works for the concert hall sometimes require special lighting, movement, costume and visual accompaniment – notably his Fourth Symphony *Star Chant*, his oboe concerto *Bird Spirit Dreaming* and his saxophone

concerto *Full Moon Dances*. His *Dawn Mantras* greeted the new millennium in an international telecast from the sails of the Sydney Opera House.

Recently completed works include *Frog and Star Cycle*, a double concerto for saxophonist Amy Dickson, percussionist Colin Currie and the Sydney Symphony; *Zodiac* for the Houston Ballet; *Bright Birds and Sorrows*, a quintet for Amy Dickson and Britain's Elias String Quartet; *Entwinings* for the Australian Chamber Orchestra; *Dances of Life and Death* for the Sydney Conservatorium Wind Symphony; and a Piano Quartet for the Australia Piano Quartet.

The composer writes:

Flower Songs is a choral *maninya* (dance/chant). Its text consists of the scientific names of a selection of central eastern Australian wild flowers.

Jonathan Mills once summarised my attitude to word setting as being 'averse to texts that are philosophical, psychological, dramatic or descriptive [and] only interested in ones that allow [him] to invoke some kind of timeless spirituality in setting them to music ... [His] essential vocal style, most evident in the vocal *maninyas* and *Flower Songs*, is characterised by modified repetition of rhythmic patterns centered on drones – a sort of hypnotic incantation.'

Flower Songs is dedicated to Nicholas Routley who commissioned it, with Australia Council assistance, for the Sydney Chamber Choir.

Micromyrtus ciliata
Senecio macranthus
Dillwynia retorta

DAVID CONTE **Invocation and Dance**

US composer David Conte is one of the last surviving students of Nadia Boulanger; he also worked very closely with Aaron Copland. He has written seven operas and more than 50 choral works, along with chamber music and works for orchestra and band. Many of his pieces have a direct connection to current issues, in the hope of transforming human existence and elevating the moral conversation about the 'pressing matters of our time': *Elegy for Matthew*, in memory of murdered gay student Matthew Shepard; *September Sun* (9/11), *The Homecoming* (Martin Luther King)...

Invocation and Dance was commissioned by the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus and first performed in 1986. Deaths from AIDS were doubling every year and there was as yet no effective treatment available. In that time and place, David Conte turned to the poetry of Walt Whitman, selecting lines from his elegy *When Lilacs Last at the Dooryard Bloom*.

To modern ears, Whitman's poem, with its references to the unnamed 'him I love', could be taken to be a gay man's lament for his dead partner, but in fact it was a response to the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, which produced in 1865 a massive wave of shock and grief on a par with the assassination of John F Kennedy almost 100 years later. Hundreds of thousands of people assembled to watch the funeral procession; millions of people lined the railway tracks to watch the train carry Lincoln's body the 2,700km from Washington to Illinois.

As he struggled to understand the grief he was feeling, 'with the knowledge of death as walking one side of me, and the thought of death close-walking the other side of me, and I in the middle as with companions, and as holding the hands of companions,' he had an epiphany which in the poem he expresses as the song of a bird: that death is a part of life, a kind and loving visitor to be welcomed and embraced. It is the bird's carol that Conte sets in *Invocation and Dance*, 'a hymn to nature and the place of death within the cycle of life on earth': a solemn invocation over a pulsating accompaniment, followed by an exuberant dance celebrating life and joy.

Come lovely and soothing death,
Undulate round the world, serenely arriving, arriving,
In the day, in the night, to all, to each,
Sooner or later delicate death.

Prais'd be the fathomless universe,
For life and joy, and for objects and knowledge curious,
And for love, sweet love—but praise! praise! praise!
For the sure-enwinding arms of cool-enfolding death.

Dark mother always gliding near with soft feet,
Have none chanted for thee a chant of fullest welcome?
Then I chant it for thee, I glorify thee above all,
I bring thee a song that when thou must indeed come, come
unfalteringly.

Approach strong deliveress,
When it is so, when thou hast taken them I joyously sing the
dead,
Lost in the loving floating ocean of thee,
Laved in the flood of thy bliss O death.

From me to thee glad serenades,
Dances for thee I propose saluting thee, adornments and
feastings for thee,
And the sights of the open landscape and the high-spread sky
are fitting,
And life and the fields, and the huge and thoughtful night.

Prais'd be the fathomless universe...
For life, joy, love, sing praise!

*Annotations by Natalie Shea © 2019
unless otherwise noted*

Sydney Chamber Choir

Artistic Director – Sam Allchurch

Sydney Chamber Choir is passionate about choral music and its unique ability to celebrate and reflect upon the stories of our past, present and future.

We love to travel deep inside the music to meet the composers and bring their vision alive in sound. We reach back to explore the masterpieces of the Baroque, Renaissance and beyond, while also championing the music of our own time and place, regularly commissioning and premiering works by established and emerging Australian composers.

Sydney Chamber Choir has toured extensively, singing in Hong Kong, Taiwan and the UK, and in 2009 was a prizewinner in the Tolosa International Choral Competition in Spain. We also tour regularly in regional NSW, most recently for Musica Viva, visiting Armidale, Grafton and Coffs Harbour with a program titled *The Art of Choral Harmony*, showcasing choral works from the 12th to the 21st century.

We have also been honoured to work with such guest conductors as Roland Peelman, Brett Weymark, Carl Crossin and Liz Scott, as well as our three previous directors Nicholas Routley, Paul Stanhope and the late Richard Gill AO.

We collaborate with leading Australian instrumentalists and ensembles including Synergy Percussion, the Australian Romantic & Classical Orchestra, Joseph Tawadros, Slava Grigoryan, Orchestra of the Antipodes, the Muffat Collective and Continuum Sax. We also enjoy more unconventional partnerships, such as our recent concerts with The Idea of North, the Hilltop Hoods and the Sydney Mardi Gras Community Choir. Committed to inspiring future generations of choral singers, we are proud to work regularly with youth ensembles such as the NSW Public Schools Singers.

Our performances have been broadcast across the country on ABC Classic and on Fine Music 102.5, and our CD recordings are available on the ABC Classic and Tall Poppies labels. Our most recent album, *Lux Aeterna* featuring music of Paul Stanhope, has been acclaimed as ‘worthy of the highest accolade’ (*Fine Music*).

Sopranos

Ria Andriani
Megan Cronin
Josephine Gibson
Wei Jiang
Belinda Montgomery
Liane Papantoniou
Rose Trevelyan

Altos

Bronwyn Cleworth
Amanda Harris
Alison Keene
Vicki Kourkoumelis
Alison Lockhart
Jenny Moriarty
Sarah Penn
Natalie Shea

Tenors

Jess Ciampa
Rob Hughes
Michael Iglesias
Murray-Luke Peard
Joel Roast
Richard Sanchez
Mackenzie Shaw

Basses

Wei-Ju Chang
Chris Matthies
Sébastien Maury
Sam Merrick
Sam Piper
Ed Suttle
Jesse van Proctor