Sydney Festival 2026

SYDNEY SYMPHONY UNDER THE STARS: 50 YEARS OF MUSIC AND PICTURES

Sydney Symphony Orchestra

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50 YEARS OF MUSIC AND PICTURES

17 January
Tumbalong Park, Darling Harbour
2 hours (with 20 minute interval)

CAST & CREDITS

ARTISTS
Conductor Benjamin Northey

PERFORMERS
Sydney Symphony Orchestra & William Barton

PRESENTER
Craig Reucassel

PROGRAM
Adam Manning: Rhythmic Acknowledgement of Country
Naomi Dodd: Cerulean Dances
Deborah Cheetham Fraillon: Treaty
Nigel Westlake: Flying Dream
INTERVAL
Dvořák: Symphony No.9, 'From the New World'

ABOUT THE SHOW

The Sydney Symphony concert you know and love is back in the heart of the city. Gather under the stars to celebrate Sydney's artistic spirit with a moving reflection on First Nations treaty, followed by a journey through 50 years of Festival moments displayed on the big screen at Tumbalong Park – featuring archival footage, photographs and exquisite live music from the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. All conducted by Sydney Symphony stalwart Benjamin Northey.

Hear music by Australian composers including Nigel Westlake and a rising star in Naomi Dodd, while world-renowned yidaki (didgeridoo) virtuoso William Barton joins the Orchestra to perform Deborah Cheetham Fraillon's Treaty. Antonin Dvořák's moving and powerful 'New World' Symphony brings the concert to a stirring close, topped off with a rousing fireworks finale.

Park your rug, unpack your snacks and enjoy this special anniversary concert beneath the summer sky.

ABOUT THE SHOW

Naomi DODD
Cerulean Dances (2024)

Gliding through expansive skies, dipping below sparkling waves and soaring across the sea – *Cerulean Dances* transports listeners through these vibrant Australian landscapes.

This work centres around the common thread of the vivid blue of skies and seas, with which Australia is synonymous. In capturing the richness and breadth of this Australian scenery, I seek to contemplate the countless stories of this land, from the distant past up to the present day.

This fanfare was my first piece written as the 2024 Young Composer in Residence with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra. This work marks an exciting step in my journey as a composer – my first work commissioned in my first residency position of this kind. It also fits the character of my work – it is a playful and jubilant dance, inspired by simple child-like awe and wonder at this beautiful country we call home.

I hope my work will take you on an imaginative journey through a range of timbres and textures, from rich and powerful, to vibrant and shimmering. Let yourself be swept up in the musical imagery of dancing waves and sweeping skies of rich cerulean blue; woven across the beautiful land of Australia.

Deborah CHEETHAM FRAILLON (born 1964)
Treaty (2025)

Treaty is the second instalment of Deborah Cheetham Fraillon's concerto for Yidaki, of which the first was *Baparripna - Dawn*, premiered by William Barton and the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra in 2022. It is composed in the tradition of programmatic music: that is to say, it has a strong narrative which drives the work throughout.

Australia has had a difficult relationship with the notion of treaty for more than 230 years.

This stands in contrast to our close neighbours in Aotearoa (New Zealand) who have leant heavily on the Treaty of Waitangi since it was signed on February 6, 1840. On that day forty-three Northland Chiefs signed the treaty and over the next eight months 500 Māori Chiefs added their endorsement as the Treaty document was taken around the country. It was not a perfect document by any means. Many times the Treaty of Waitangi has failed the Māori people and yet it has served as a vital reference point for the rights and dignity of those it is designed to protect.

No such Treaty existed in Australia until late 2025 when, after decades of consultation, negotiation and relationship building the Government of Victoria signed a statewide treaty with Aboriginal leadership and established the First Peoples Assembly.

Treaty captures the journey of my ancestors from final moments of self-determination and sovereignty to the present day.

The arrival of colonisation is heralded by the ominous majesty of the French horns. They represent not only the invaders but equally the leadership of The People (First Nations people) as they stare down the threat of invasion. Even in the face of cannon fire we can sense their nobility – not as simplistic savages, as Jean- Jacques Rousseau would have us think, but as the warriors, scientists, musicians, philosophers, farmers, healers, dancers, story tellers, architects, musicians and astronomers of the longest continuing culture in the world.

Why use a Western instrument to speak to this? Many First Nations leaders were quick to learn the language of the invaders, hoping to be able to better negotiate with them. This shared horn theme then becomes a kind of dialogue of determined will for both the invaders and those facing invasion. The bass drum, however, speaks only one language – destruction and decimation.

The yidaki's sound of wind through the she-oak provides a moment of respite. On the east coast of Australia, the she-oak [casuarina] provides a protected space for babies to sleep in their tarnuk or cradle. The pine needles which cover the ground at the base of the tree are a natural repellent to insects and other creatures which would otherwise harm the babies.

The yidaki falls silent as the Aboriginal People, startled by the brutality of the conflict, mourn their losses. The cellos and violas lament in the aftermath: loss, regrouping and mourning.

A kookaburra call (Yidaki) rings out, reasserting nature's presence as the wind blows through an open space and exposed landscape.

The sorrow of those who mourn is individualised by the bassoon solo.
Suddenly the aggression returns as a shocking interruption of grief, inserting terror. Once again, the machinery of warfare is rolled into place. The attack is unrelenting. The People are scattered, running for their lives, the sound of military drums in pursuit. The yidaki's wild call sounding the warning of imminent attack becomes an agitated heartbeat and heavy breathing of those who have once again been forced to flee.

Plagued by uncertainty and fear, The People gather, this time in ever diminishing number, to determine their next move. They shelter once again in the shade of the she-oak.

The bodies of the mothers, fathers, daughters and sons, young men and old warriors, painters, singers, healers and dancers lie strewn across the abundant fields of their tribal nations. The smoke lingers as does the sound of distant cannon fire as the progress of colonisation moves on to the next nation and the next.

The yidaki growls as hunger sets in for those who have survived the onslaught. Cut off from hunting lands and water sources, those who were not blown apart by cannons and gunfire succumb to the slow torture of hunger and disease. Heartbroken, the survivors determine to draw on their resilience.

Those with good intentions arrive. Across the continent, at whatever time colonisation arrived, it was quickly followed by those with good intentions, often religious, offering hope. A new way of life. Missions grew. Relative safety for those who lived there, but the low growl of the yidaki is a warning.

Eventually, echoing historic records during this time, the yidaki is silenced as cultural expression and language were suppressed and eventually replaced with the trappings of Western Christianity. Many of the people adopted these ways as a means of survival. But the good intentions were often corrupted by the hatred and greed of the mission managers, and the people realised that safety was conditional at best and routinely unreliable.

The People find whatever way they can to remain connected to their identity, culture and spirituality, even if expressed through a new language. Leaders emerge and The People begin to look towards a return to self-determination and the reassertion of sovereignty. The yidaki, silent for so long, returns with a high gentle call to the French horn, the return of culture, cautious but undeniable, gentle but strong.

Talk of a Treaty is introduced (falling minor and major thirds of the tonic chord signal 'Trea-ty'). Surely after having lived within the bounds of the new laws, having fought and died as Australian service men and women in two world wars and other global conflicts; surely after having learned about, practised and accepted the introduced spiritual language and customs, a conversation about sovereign rights could begin?

No, The People must stay in their place. But they rise and rise again in the face of so many defeats.
Inevitably the protest and the movement of The People gains momentum in the face of anger, hostility, denialism, ignorance, fear, racism, deaths in custody, youth suicide, homelessness, dispossession, all bound together with so much bureaucracy (snare rim-shots like so many keyboard clicks in the 'Circumlocution Office' – the type of government department, satirised in Charles Dickens's novel *Little Dorrit* (1857), in which the establishment is shown as run purely for the benefit of its incompetent and obstructive officials.
Calls for a Treaty ring out now as a major and minor seconds. The Yidaki – growls with wild calls of defiance demanding Treaty!

The work crescendos to end on a knife-edge. Breathless, we fall on the tonic but what does it actually mean? What will come of it all? What is the next movement of this work?
Deborah Cheetham Fraillon AO © 2025

Nigel WESTLAKE
Flying Dream – Suite for orchestra from the movie *Paper Planes*

It's difficult to quantify the emotional impact music can have in the context of a film. Director Robert Connolly admired Nigel Westlake's earlier score for *Babe*, and was certain that an original, though conventional, orchestral score from Westlake for *Paper Planes* (2015) would traverse and enhance the rich emotional territory of the film. Westlake admits that writing a film score can be challenging on many levels, 'but it's always gratifying to engage with a director who sees music as a priority, and is willing to allocate appropriate resources to the task.'

Paper Planes is a tender portrait of male grief and

tells the story of Dylan, a young boy, who lives in Western Australia and dreams of competing in the World Paper Plane Championships in Japan. *Flying Dream* is a reworking of elements of the film score. Though not as character-specific as the leitmotifs heard in *Babe*, the main themes nevertheless trace the drama of the movie. Translucent, airy textures of flight give way to a heroic phrase first heard in the bassoon, picked up soon after by the solo horn, voicing 12-year-old Dylan's fantasies about flying. A determined and insistent rhythm in lower strings and brass, highlighted by military-style snare drum, accompany those moments when Dylan moves closer to his final goal.

The main impetus of the central section of *Flying Dream* is one of accented cross-rhythms. Westlake says it's a musical tracing of the paper plane's journey through the air, reflecting the playfulness of the action: 'Being picked up by the breeze, flung off course, and then back on course.' Something of a metaphor for life, perhaps, evincing the way we are all subject to forces beyond our control.

ANTONIN DVOŘÁK (1841–1904)
Symphony No.9, 'From the New World' (1893)

In his last and most celebrated symphony, Antonín Dvořák mingles excitement at the sights and sounds of America with downright homesickness for his native Bohemia. Dvořák had arrived in New York in September 1892 to become director of the National Conservatory of Music, and the symphony was composed between January and May of the following year. Apart from the diplomatic cantata, *The American Flag*, it was his first composition in the USA.

A Czech-American pupil, Josef Jan Kovarík, who travelled with Dvořák to New York, has recounted that when he was to take the score to Anton Seidl, conductor of the New York Philharmonic, for its first performance, the composer paused at the last moment to write on the title page '*Z Nového sveta*' (From the New World). Significantly, written in Czech rather than the German or English that Seidl or his American audience would have understood, the inscription implied no suggestion that the new work was an 'American' symphony (Kovarík was adamant about this) but meant merely 'Impressions and greetings from the New World'.

The 'impressions' that crowded Dvořák's mind as he wrote the symphony were, of course, the frenetic bustle of New York, the seething cauldron of humanity in the metropolis, and the folk caught up in its impersonal whirl – the African-Americans and Native Americans. Above all, he developed a fascination for what he was able to hear of the music of these two races – the plantation songs of Stephen Foster; spirituals sung to him on several occasions by Harry T Burleigh, a black student at the National Conservatory; transcriptions he was given of some Native American songs, and others he heard at Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. Dvořák claimed in a newspaper interview that the two musics were nearly identical and that their fondness for type of pentatonic scale made them remarkably similar to Scottish music. But it must be acknowledged that his acquaintance with the songs – those of the Native Americans in particular – was distinctly superficial.

Dvořák's fascination with these people stemmed from his reading, some thirty years earlier, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's epic poem The Song of Hiawatha in a Czech translation. Although he did not persevere with ideas he had for writing an opera on the subject of America, the Hiawatha concept nevertheless surfaced to some extent in this symphony.

The great Dvořák scholar Otakar Sourek found the physical manifestations of America embodied mainly in the surging flow and swiftly changing moods of the first and last movements, soaring at times to heights of impressive grandeur. It is in the Largo and Scherzo that Dvořák is said to have admitted drawing on *The Song of Hiawatha* – Minnehaha's bleak forest funeral in the slow movement, and the wedding feast and Indians dancing in the *Scherzo*. The music goes far beyond such flimsy poetic inspiration, however, for the *Largo* positively aches with the composer's nostalgia and homesickness, while the Trio of the third movement is an unmistakable Czech dance.

Ultimately, the symphony as a whole is far more Czech than American.

The very familiarity of the music to most listeners, the facility with which well-remembered tunes appear and reappear, is apt to blur the subtleties of Dvořák's writing and symphonic construction. Most notable is the way themes for each movement recur in succeeding movements, often skilfully woven into climaxes or codas. Unlike Beethoven, however, in whose Ninth Symphony the ideas of the first three movements are reviewed, only to be rejected and

transcended in a towering finale, Dvořák uses his earlier thoughts as a force of structural and spiritual unity, so that in combination they transcend themselves and each other.

In the miraculous Largo, the famous and elegiac melody first stated by the solo cor anglais – the melody that later became 'Goin' home' – culminates grandly on trumpets against festive recollections of the two main themes from the first movement. Both first movement themes recur again in the coda of the Scherzo, the first of them (somewhat disguised) actually appearing three times earlier in the movement as well – at the end of the Scherzo section and twice in the transition of the Trio.

The development section of the finale contains allusions to the main themes of both Largo and Scherzo, and in the masterly coda the main themes of all three preceding movements are reviewed, that of the fast movement finally engaging in dialogue with the finale's main subject until cut off by an urgent rush of highly conventional chords. Unexpectedly these lead to a delicate pianissimo wind chord with which the symphony ultimately soars heavenward, freed from earthbound shackles.

Anthony Cane © 1994

ABOUT SYDNEY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Founded in 1932 by the Australian Broadcasting Commission, the Sydney Symphony Orchestra has evolved into one of the world's finest orchestras as Sydney has become one of the world's great cities. Resident at the iconic Sydney Opera House, the Sydney Symphony Orchestra also performs in venues throughout Sydney and regional New South Wales, and international tours to Europe, Asia and the USA have earned the Orchestra worldwide recognition for artistic excellence.

The Sydney Symphony Orchestra's concerts encompass masterpieces from the classical repertoire, music by some of the finest living composers, and collaborations with guest artists from all genres, reflecting the Orchestra's versatility and diverse appeal. Its award-winning education program is central to its commitment to the future of live symphonic music, and the Orchestra promotes the work of Australian composers through performances, recordings and its commissioning program.

The Orchestra's first chief conductor was Sir Eugene Goossens, appointed in 1947; he was followed by Nicolai Malko, Dean Dixon, Moshe Atzmon, Willem van Otterloo, Louis Frémaux, Sir Charles Mackerras, Zdenêk Mácal, Stuart Challender, Edo de Waart and Gianluigi Gelmetti. Vladimir Ashkenazy was Principal Conductor from 2009 to 2013, followed by David Robertson as Chief Conductor from 2014 to 2019. Australian-born Simone Young commenced her role as Chief Conductor in 2022, a year in which the Orchestra made its return to a renewed Sydney Opera House Concert Hall.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We acknowledge Gadigal Country, her lands, sea and sky, we acknowledge her custodians, the Gadigal people, their kin the Wangal, Bidjigal, Cabrogal and Cammeraygal who often visited this Country to connect and share. We offer our respect to their Elders both past and present.

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