

Music Presentations at the Independent

Stuart & Sons Pianos

Jazz pianist Kevin Hunt, one of our scholars, was doing his Master's degree at Sydney University. One of his topics was the comparison of the Australian designed and made **Stuart & Sons Piano** and other pianos.

We had two *Stuart* pianos and a *Kawai* piano and on this occasion a *Steinway* brought in for another concert. Kevin had been analyzing the difference between the pianos from a technical point of view. He discussed the pros and cons but was more interested in the comparative difference and invited fellow jazz musicians and one prominent pianist to play the three different pianos and give impressions of what they thought. They included jazz pianists Paul McNamara and Judy Bailey, who could be relied upon to give informed appraisals. It was an interesting date during which he talked about what he had done and where his studies had taken him. He played each piano and demonstrated what he thought he could do better on one than another. When Judy Bailey came we had three *Stuarts* and she quickly identified the one she preferred, giving her reasons. With this piano you heard her style and sound.

Since the 1950s there has been a jazz venue, *El Rocco*, in Sydney's Kings Cross, where Australian modern jazz was born. In the 1960s the players included drummer Stewie Speer, Judy Bailey, the talented, brilliant young pianists Bryce Rohde and Mike Nock and bassist Lyn Christie. It still operates as a seven nights a week venue from which came the leaders of modern Australian jazz. Bryce went to America and made a career there. He was back in Sydney after we had taken delivery of the *Stuart* piano from the Sydney Festival. By then he was nearly 80 years of age. He had never heard of the *Stuart* and was a pianist who really thought about what he played. It was highly emotive playing, very good technically and he explored everything about pianos to get the most from them. He sat down at the *Stuart* to play and I lost him for at least half an hour as he voiced chords, different inversions



Kevin Hunt at the *Stuart* Piano, Seaborn Room, Independent Theatre.

and in different keys. He was not playing any tunes but exploring various registers on the piano. At the end he wished he had such a piano thirty years before, saying he could do things he had never been able to do on any other piano. He was exploring its cleanness. On some pianos you put a cluster of a chord together in such a way that it gets a diffused sound; it is not clean. The *Stuart* delivers cleanness from every note no matter what you do. You can play seconds which are basically dissonant, you can hear the two different notes clearly and that is what Bryce had been doing. **Wayne Stuart** is well aware of such responses and worked with Kevin Hunt during his study, exploring these issues.



The Macassar Ebony *Stuart & Sons* piano commissioned by the Trust (No. 17, 2.3 metres).

The *Stuart* piano is bound closely with the Trust and the Independent. Wayne had developed his piano in Victoria, reaching a point where it needed a big step to move it into final research and production. Newcastle University Conservatorium took on that role, led by the pianist, composer and teacher, Professor Robert Constable, providing him with the resources and capacity to do so. Whilst there, Wayne formed a relationship with a strong supporter of Australian music: Robert Albert who had many years of involvement in the music business, as a publisher of **Albert's Music** in the early part of the twentieth century and then as a studio manager in King Street, Sydney, and also as an arts manager, including for rock group *AC/DC*. Robert backed Wayne and they established a company to take the *Stuart* piano out of its research stage. Wayne

moved into premises in Newcastle, and with Robert Albert set up *Piano Australia Pty Limited*. They established a factory and began making pianos. Wayne had already made two pianos housed in the Conservatorium. They were the product of his research; full concert grands with a nine foot or 2.9 metres' length. Not only is the technical design unique, but so is the wood. Wayne specialized in using Australian woods, believing they had a unique sound, and if the wood veneer was used properly it would enhance the sound of the piano. His first two pianos were made of Tasmanian Huon Pine, a fabulous wood which has a long life and grows in protected forests. Apparently, for sailing ships made by convicts in Tasmania, Huon Pine was the preferred wood because it

would survive anything and did not deteriorate in water. Wayne, who is Tasmanian, had this as his preferred wood. With Robert Albert's support and help he continued to make pianos.

During the next fifteen years from the late 1990s, Wayne made over twenty pianos. These are all handmade instruments; it takes a year to make such a piano. I had been involved with Wayne at Newcastle Conservatorium. By 2004 I was at the Trust, we had the Independent, and I became aware again of *Stuart* pianos. Wayne had won an Australia Council grant to take his full concert grand measurements and redesign them for a smaller, seven foot, 2.2 metre, instrument. From a business point of view it seemed the moneymaking aspect of piano manufacture would be in this smaller instrument which would go into recording studios, private homes, small halls and church halls. This is the size of grand pianos in schools and conservatoriums. Full concert grands belong on the concert stage and there are limited opportunities for these, so the business was definitely for smaller ones. While Wayne had won support to redesign his drawings for a smaller instrument, he did not have money to make them. After discussion with the directors, we recommended help for Wayne by providing him with funds to make prototype pianos of this size. Although it was a grant, we had a commercial approach, commissioning the first three pianos, about the equivalent value of the Trust's support. I selected Macassar Ebony wood from New Guinea for one of those pianos. It is hard to obtain but Wayne had enough left for one piano in his store. He also had some Western Red Cedar which was 10,000 years old. It is better than wine. I thought the Macassar Ebony would make a wonderful case and a wonderful sound. It was black but had a little flame through it. He agreed to make one piano from that and the Trust still has that piano. It is still playing very well; the piano Judy Bailey liked most of all.

We did not receive the first piano. Rowan Atkinson¹ had heard about an Australian in Newcastle making pianos. He travelled from Brisbane, where he was performing, to meet Wayne. He played the big piano and on the spot bought a 2.2 metre one still on the drawing board. So we got the next three including a Huon Pine and an Macassar Ebony. We gave Wayne the money in advance and he produced four pianos. One went to Rowan Atkinson, the other three to the Independent.

We were recommended to the Sydney Festival as a potential host for its piano which was a *Stuart & Sons* 3 metre concert grand made of Western Red Cedar. It had been in the Sydney Opera House and at another venue. It had been neglected and had deteriorated after being unattended under an air-conditioning duct for a long period of time. The Sydney Festival bought

... as soon as I heard [the Stuart piano], I was in heaven. It was so responsive to touch—the clarity, the dynamic range, the lovely articulation. I spent an hour playing it, and another two hours talking to Wayne.

Gerard Willems

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¹ Rowan Atkinson CBE (born 1955), English actor, comedian and screenwriter.

it with funding from the New South Wales government in support of Wayne's initiative. Wayne had been taken on by the Department of Trade as their figurehead and drawcard in an Expo showcasing Australian innovation and scientific research. The piano had gone to an Expo in New York under the auspices of the Department and been successfully received. The Festival had little need for a piano as it did not program solo piano recitals. No-one had taken personal interest in the piano and eventually Wayne was approached to take it back. Wayne suggested the Independent and the Trust. After discussions, the Festival agreed we should take responsibility to care for and insure it. We were at a point where we were wanting to develop the theatre and a concert grand piano was perfect. It also fitted our philosophy to help an Australian innovator move in the profession. For Wayne to have his piano on a Sydney stage where he could show people what it could do, became a good opportunity for all of us. We then had four pianos on site, two in the foyer and two on stage.

We had also met **Ron Overs**, a piano technician who, like Wayne, was questioning the validity of a 150 year old habit of making pianos the same way. He had different approaches to Wayne, but he was looking at ways to improve the quality of the piano. Whereas Wayne was concerned about the entire piano, everything from the smallest piece, to the case, the action, to its technical issues and its look, Ron was more interested in taking an existing case and putting in a worked-over action. He was doing this with *Steinway* and *Kawai* cases, putting in actions he had manufactured or doctored. One of these came up for sale through an associate. This was the other arm of Australian technology. There were not many people in the world pushing the barrier of piano technology; *Fazioli* is about the only one of note in Italy. We bought this piano intending to provide a good environment and opportunity for people to see what an *Overs* piano sounds like. Jazz and classical players like both pianos. The *Overs'* action is considered to be very fast and good to play. The *Stuart* has different technology and delivers different things. What is great is that the instruments are all different.

We had five pianos at the Independent. Since we could not become a piano showroom, we sought homes for two of the 2.2 metre pianos. The Huon Pine went to Japan through Wayne and Robert Albert and the other to Admiralty House in Sydney. We were left with the Macassar Ebony, a wonderful piano. *Stuart* pianos are all different and it is unfair to compare them. Having now equipped ourselves with a good smaller piano for the theatre foyer and the full concert grand for the stage, we were in a position to do two piano works when necessary. We were able to test the appropriateness to do this when Gerard Willems undertook a concert at Government House Ballroom. With one of his talented, advanced students he held a master class on a Beethoven piano concerto. One piano for the solo part and the other to play the orchestral accompaniment. We offered our 2.2 metre, the Macassar Ebony piano, and a full concert *Stuart* was also made

available. The lid was taken off the small piano and pushed towards the bow of the big one. The soloist played the grand. The balance was superb. In fact, the smaller piano was the stronger of the two. We did a similar thing in the Australian Club not long after with two *Stuarts*. Gerard Willems played the solo part with Phillip Shovk² playing the orchestral part of Beethoven's *Emperor Concerto*. Again, a superb sound, plenty of power and quality.

I had been developing the use of the theatre and trying to attract people who might be interested in the *Stuart* pianos. They were free to bring in another piano if they wanted, but most were happy to use the *Stuart*. The big problem for the theatre was developing an established audience. *Musica Viva* subsequently brought their audience and at that early stage we needed bookings with a ready-made audience for hirers. I thought ethnic communities would bring their own audiences, so I contacted the Armenian community renowned for their prowess in classical music. They advised they were bringing a piano, violin and 'cello trio from Armenia, the Khachaturian Trio, who had a strong association with the *Khachaturian Society*, based at a museum near the Russian border. The pianist was bringing her daughter, also an accomplished pianist, and given our two pianos, they suggested programming a work for two pianos by Babajanian, a prominent Armenian composer, who wrote interesting but difficult and demanding work for keyboard, a bit like Rachmaninov. Our audience capacity was 300 and their group included about 250 people. They brought their own audience and sold out. The members of the trio were musical leaders in Armenia. The violinist had been a soloist and performed with the *Moscow Virtuosi*, the cellist held a position with the Armenian Philharmonic Orchestra, while the pianist was a Professor at Yerevan State Conservatory. I knew they would be exacting about what they wanted from the room and the *Stuart* piano.

Stuart pianos have extended keyboards, with 14 more keys on a studio grand, such as the Trust's piano, than the usual 88. Most of the extra keys are in the bass although more recent *Stuart* grands have 108 keys extending both to the top and bottom notes. This extended length can create orientation problems for some players familiar with less keys. The *Stuart* also has four pedals, two left and two right. Responses to concert pianos are personal, so while some adjust easily to the *Stuart* keyboard, others don't. Also, the sound is so clean and so open, if your technique is not up to scratch it will expose you. We all know there are ways of getting through a concert with imperfections and you cover them up and the public never see it but on a *Stuart* piano you cannot do that.

The Khachaturian Trio asked to come on the day of the concert to look at the room and the piano. The piano was set at the back of the stage because the forestage was set up for something else earlier in the day. They spoke very little English but communicated musically very clearly. The

² Phillip Shovk—Winner Hephzibah Menuhin Prize and Best Australian Pianist Prize, 1988 Sydney International Piano Competition. Lecturer in Piano and Accompaniment at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music.

pianist played some difficult pieces while the others listened. During the rehearsal they found the piano to be so good, they stopped talking and just played. The 'cellist had an instrument provided by the Russian government, a famous *Testore* Italian 'cello, and the violinist played a *Stradivarius*. Superb instrumentation matched to a modern piano in a hall that had been revamped. The concert was stunning; the sound superb. They capped it off by having the second piano on stage which the pianist's daughter played. They performed a technically stunning piano duet. They played one work and changed pianos for the fun of it and played another one. They did not speak much English but you could see they were really enjoying it and this was more than just a concert. They were in their element; in their comfort zone with fellow Armenians.

The Trust initiative with the *Stuart* piano was a good one, which artistically we will never regret. It helped Wayne get established. He is an innovator and has made several of these small pianos which are now all over the place. One of our smaller ones was number seventeen. There is one in a concert hall in Wales. Generally in Australia they are in educational institutions; Sydney University Great Hall; New South Wales University and the Conservatorium. Recently Wayne has been revising his view about what metal should be used on the bass strings. He makes everything in the factory, except for the castors. He wound the strings himself and made the metal on top of it. The final covering was a modern kind of material. It is a special composition which allowed for a cleaner bottom sound and when you played an F down the bottom it was just superb. He is always looking for improvement. This was the Henry Royce approach applied to the *Rolls Royce* motorcar, absolute perfectionism, and when something was working he would pull it apart and see if he could make it work better and if not, he would invent something to make it better. Wayne is doing the same thing, always looking to take things to the next stage. This is a most unusual approach to instrument-making from anyone in the world. He is very exacting about what he thinks the piano should be used for. He is interested in initiatives that take the instrument, and use what it has to give, to achieve a musical outcome. Consequently, he is interested in having his pianos used for contemporary music.

A young man from Brazil, Arthur Chimero, had been looking on the internet and found the *Stuart* piano. He is a performer and composer who made contact with Wayne and asked if he could look at the piano and perhaps record some of his music on it. Wayne warmed to the idea because it is exactly what he wants. Arthur had been exploring the bottom end of the piano register and wanted something that would extend further than the existing keyboard, which the *Stuart* did. He also wanted a sound and a cluster of sound he could write for that end. He spent some time with Wayne at the factory where they did some recordings. We invited him to play his music as well as a Beethoven work at the Independent. In the short time he had been in Australia, he had come to terms with what the *Stuart* piano can do and was using it. He had adapted it and adopted it into his approach to composition.

The *Stuart* is also very good with traditional repertoire. Piers Lane playing the Chopin repertoire is superb.³ It is a major contribution to Australian music. For the Trust to have been part of that, we can be very proud. This is where the Trust is going, quietly doing things to create the musical future for Australians, by Australians, here and internationally. We have gone past the point where sixty years ago we set up an opera company to service the needs of opera. Now we are helping musicians and creators to take their craft to the highest degree and to specialize in new and innovative things like the *Stuart* piano which become part of international musical culture. The technology is such now that it is possible for these experiences to be shared through the internet and other digital means.

The Long Ride Home Opera

With the Independent renovation, we had a decent chamber music room. We had put in a small stage that could be dropped down so small scale opera was also possible. I wanted it to be used to the maximum of its capacity in whatever genre, music or the spoken word. We had access to our scholars who were already doing work which would be perfect in the Independent. One scholar we assisted, Thomas Rimes, was originally organ scholar at St Paul's College, Sydney University. I had come from Melbourne to take the Trust job and was resident as a tutor at St Paul's. He played the organ and conducted the orchestra of Women's College and St Paul's College players. Later, he applied to us for assistance to study conducting in Memphis, USA. He established a relationship with an opera singer in America and developed interest in the genre, subsequently producing operas in Italy. He then became repetiteur for an opera company in Kassel, Germany, where he is now a principal conductor. Soon after 9/11 he approached me having written an opera inspired by that tragic event.⁴ It was a small opera, with four or five singers, and a small chorus, which was not mandatory, of about seven or eight voices.

Lisa Roberts, another scholar, was Artist-in-Residence at the Independent Theatre and this was a way to test opera in the space. Lisa and Tom worked together to put it on. Set in a country town in Australia, it is the story of a family whose daughter was working in New York. They believed she was in the towers when the planes hit that day. One of her siblings was on the telephone most of the opera, trying to get information without any success, but she kept on trying. Woven around this theme was the dynamics between country people who were so far removed from the New York tragedy they could barely find a way to understand what was happening. There was conflict between the family and a member of the community over the

³ Piers Lane AO (b.1958), Australian pianist who studied at Queensland Conservatorium of Music. Was named Best Australian Pianist at the inaugural Sydney International Piano Competition in 1977. Since 2007 he has been the Artistic Director of the annual Australian Festival of Chamber Music and, since 2016, of the Sydney International Piano Competition. He plays recitals throughout the world, working extensively in England and Europe.
⁴ 9/11: represents the date 11th September 2001—when a series of terrorist attacks by the Islamic group al Qaeda was made against the United States of America. Nearly 3000 people were killed and more than 6,000 injured when four passenger planes were hijacked and were deliberately crashed into buildings including the twin towered World Trade Centre in New York.

girl who had left for New York and there was play within play going on in this work. It was very cleverly written and about Australians living in the country facing a modern city event which was a huge disaster, having to deal with technology they could barely understand or communicate through. They learn eventually that she is alive and there is great relief, but by this time they have worked through many personal crises and accusations about letting her go to America. We produced its world premiere at the Independent Theatre, and Tom made a recording of the score with piano only. Here was a bringing together of two scholars; Lisa with her voice training, having put together and trained the chorus, while Tom selected the soloists and rehearsed them. He played the piano with a small ensemble, for which he rewrote the score. It was very well done.

The audience we attracted from our database of people. We had been building a growing list of people with every event at the Independent. As part of a bigger plan, we established a ticketing system and encouraged people to buy online rather than through the box office. It began with a small take-up but eventually the majority were buying online, some 75%. We captured their email when they purchased. We started to analyze attendees to identify what they liked and attended. The development of **Pacific Opera** happened in the Independent. We had several operatic productions there, so an opera audience developed. We emailed and sent communications to those people and built an audience. Also there were the natural ones, like St Paul's College, who were very supportive of their alumni. We undertook to mount the production with access to whatever audience we could find. As it turned out, there was an adequate audience. Any proposal that came onto my desk was considered seriously.

Musica Viva Coffee Concerts

I wanted *Musica Viva* because it was key to me that their program should be there, even if it was not their mainstream series. I understand that for something like the *Goldner Quartet* there is a big fee to pay and you need a recital hall with 1500 people to recoup that and *Musica Viva* is not a charity. I had been talking with *Musica Viva* in general and no proposal had come forward until I found out they ran a coffee concert in Melbourne. Apparently it had not gone well but the concept was similar to the Wigmore Hall *Coffee Concerts*, with an hour's music followed by refreshments. Nothing new but they were trying it. We had established a strong catering arm with the theatre, with good suppliers of food, especially cakes. I always did the tasting and could feed back to the wholesaler. Most people who used the theatre commented on the great food; we were confident about putting forward the notion of a coffee concert at the Independent. I suggested we supply food, coffee and tea, served by our staff, and would recoup a percentage of each ticket sold to cover costs for ushers and theatre hire, so for us it was at least a break-even, maybe even a little profit depending on the numbers.

Musica Viva had a lot of loyal, aged subscribers who had attended their concerts at the Opera House or City Recital Hall but could no longer physically do that and they were leaving the subscription lists. *Musica Viva* was concerned they did not lose those people to music so they were looking for ways to keep them. After discussion it was decided to provide coffee at 10am and a concert from 11am to noon. High quality cake, tea and coffee would be included in the ticket price. We knew from experience of our Saturday and Sunday afternoon concerts there is a demographic between seventy and ninety years of age who found the Independent easy to get to and park if they were driving. If they were not driving they could be easily let down and picked up outside the front door. There is a good bus service. We found there was a potential audience, outside of *Musica Viva* and knew they liked a short concert and to get home before dark. Morning was a good time; *Musica Viva* agreed and devised a series of Coffee Concerts. They had five concerts on five Tuesdays a year every other month, starting from February through to November and at each concert they had one of their flagship groups, like *Duo Sol* or the *Goldner Quartet*. It worked very well. I supervised the serving of cake and running of the morning, starting at about 6 am and finishing at 1pm. It was quite intensive. I used to be around to gauge reactions and solicit responses to the cake, particularly if we tried a new one. It was obvious they had strong views. One man admitted he came for the cake over the music! These events quickly sold out so were a success for both organizations. They provided high profile product with good quality players. Not only did the cake and coffee go well for the audience but for the performers the environment was healthy and good. When I heard musicians saying it was easy to play, I knew we had done the acoustic work correctly.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, there were young people starting out who captivated no-one's interest. They were too early for *Musica Viva* and were a little uncontrollable because they had purist ideas. They would have been happy to present a whole program of Ligetti and expect the audience to stay beyond the interval. While acknowledging that there were good musicians in such groups, I knew they needed assistance with repertoire and programming. We did not need to dictate to them or take over their lives but we needed to give them a resource where they could develop ideas and worst case scenario test these ideas on an audience and find out what does and does not work. Talking with these people, I could see they were ready to take direction and if we were genuinely to help them they would do the best they could within their capacity so we did not get to loggerheads about programming; they were always pretty good. There were several groups like that. We knew they had no money or backers and no audience. Audiences need to be encouraged to come through the performers or the program or both. I was working with people to get them to think like that.

We had one young group who started thinking about the presentation and they were very creative, talented and efficient. They had a singer, pianist and bassist and another instrument from time to time and they would present their concert like a stage show. They began to dress in costume and at other times would act out the song through singing. In one case they had a dancer performing. This kind of flexibility in the presentation began to happen and they started to build an audience of people interested in their work. Over several years support started to come for these people. It is expensive to run any venue and one could not expect these people to provide that money nor did they have the money.

Developing Audiences

Our objective was to give opportunity for groups to build an audience, not just any audience but their own particular audience and supporters. We would give them access to the venue without a fee until a certain time when we knew their audience was building. Most people could get an audience of twenty or thirty from our lists and if they added the ten people they knew, there was forty people and it was starting to be healthy. We had a very tight control on our costs and our staff. We did everything essential for proper fire control but we did not go over the top. On the bar we had one person; most other places have three. Our view was not to make money from the bar, just provide a service. If you did that at the Recital Hall it would be disaster; they would expect four or five people behind the bar and they look to it as an income revenue. We were thinking more of the concert. We kept staff to a minimum and the condition was that they had to do the ticketing through our box office which also gave them access to our mailing list, which was good. We could also pre-sell them on our website by putting what was coming up the next month and then we started to link that to our tickets. It became more sophisticated as each month went on. They could buy through our website and the group did not have anything to do, except provide me with an A3 size poster of the group to put in the window and any flyers they cared to produce to go in the racks at the theatre, because people did take those things away. It is about the only print thing that still works in theatres and they all did that. From the box office returns, the first consideration was staff costs. They were things we could not negotiate and we were not over the top. We were just bare minimum staff and we talked that through with the players so they knew exactly what the staff did and why there are fire regulations. All of them agreed at the end of the day when they understood the issues. Everyone was different. Some had already a guaranteed audience and I did not want them to be more advantaged than the others and take the advantage at the expense of the others. So everyone was different but basically the box office provided for the staff first. The next amount went to the artists to pay their basic costs. If there was money left over, a fee for hire hall would be charged but if there was not

enough money we would wear it as a loss of income. It did not really cost us except we had no maintenance costs coming in. It started to work and allowed people to build their own audience.

The Seraphim Trio had been doing successful concerts for over ten years. Every year they did a series of two concert programs in Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide, all in one weekend. The Trio started in Melbourne but the cellist moved to become a member of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra and the other two are still in Melbourne. Twice a year they convened to play chamber music, but there was obviously not any money being made out of it. In Victoria and South Australia they had supportive audiences, but in Sydney they were never able to find an audience and they had tried playing in a variety of places. They thought the Independent might be the answer. It gave them a good facility, a good piano, and a good room to play in. It was a sizeable theatre, 300 people, compared with the Melba Hall, University of Melbourne, which accommodates about 150 people. When they gave their first concerts, there were thirty-two or forty payers in the audience. They stayed with us for eight years and we gave them deals like that. I did a special deal where we charged them a percentage of the box office. So if they got a 150 people they paid X for the rental and that was all they had to pay. I think there were about four grades, eighty and up to 150, 200, and the price went up as the figures went up but it was all recoupable from the box office. They stayed with us, coming to the theatre until we left. By the time we left they had probably a stable audience of 120 or 130 people. Although it is not fantastic, I consider it was a success because they had developed a following which could only grow if they continued to provide good quality performances and interesting programs.

So, that was the concept I was trying to achieve, and to get there we would cut the cloth to suit the occasion so every negotiation was different. By 2012 there were about sixty concerts we supported. Others, which were paid like *Musica Viva*, brought it up to over eighty, so in that year we ran eighty concerts, quite an achievement. There were well known chamber groups: the *Fitzroy Ensemble*, the *Goldner Quartet* and Gerard Willems playing Beethoven. There was a tribute concert to Graeme Bell, one of the great Australian jazz musicians. He died, aged 97, in June 2012. When he turned ninety he retired, presenting his last concert at the Independent which we funded and encouraged. That concert, which was recorded, was on a *Stuart* piano which he loved. He played with those left from his original band, including Bob Bernard and Paul Furness. It was sold out. When he died, drummer Laurie Thompson asked to do a memorial event at the Independent and invited the old players to come along. We projected, on a screen right across the proscenium arch, scenes from Graeme's life including old clippings from the 1950s about his touring by bus around Australia with those old musicians, interviews with some of those people, all compiled into a composite which we ran throughout the program. Interspersed in that, members of the band played some of his renowned tunes. It was a tremendous, sold out success and a great tribute to Graeme.



SERAPHIM TRIO

Schumann Quintet and Korngold
with Andrew Haveron and Jacqui Cronin

ANNA GOLDSWORTHY piano
TIMOTHY NANKERVIS cello | HELEN AYRES violin

Sunday October 28 at 3:30 PM
The Independent Theatre, North Sydney
a Prelude in Tea Concert

Sydney Symphony Concertmaster Andrew Haveron joins Seraphim Trio and violinist Jacqueline Cronin to perform Schumann's masterpiece, the Quintet in E flat major. By pairing the keyboard as an equal partner with the established string quartet, Schumann invents an electrifying new genre capable of bringing chamber music out of the private salon and into the public concert hall. To be equally treasured is Korngold's gorgeous Suite Op. 23 for two violins, cello and keyboard, combining a rich lyricism with modern rhythmic vitality.

TICKETS
ADULT \$48, CONCESSION AND UNDER 30 \$30
STUDENT \$22, CHILD \$16
INCLUDES AFTERNOON TEA FROM 2.30 PM

Tickets theindependent.org.au or phone (02) 9409 4462

The Idea of North

No-one was interested in reviewing us. We did approach the press on a couple of occasions but it was not mainstream enough for them. We were not the Opera House or *Musica Viva* and had people playing they had probably never even heard of. The best they would have covered would have been Graeme Bell. The Australian media was super cautious. Anything to sell a newspaper was in but anything about developing a person's career was their last interest and our primary interest. There were other successes. *The Idea of North* are our scholars. They received assistance from us at the point when they had been together for about ten years, since their days at University in Canberra. They were singing *acapella* and jazz *acapella* well, but lacked real sophistication. Up against groups like *The Real Group*, which was the leader in the world, and some of the American quartets, particularly on the college circuit, they were respectably considered but did not have the edge those people had. They were self-governing and running their own publicity and had thought through a way to build their audience.

Whoever you are, you have to be concerned about your audience if you want to survive as a player; Barenboim has to be concerned about his audience just the same as any of these people who have never been heard of. They had reached a point where they knew the way to get to their audience was through new media. *Facebook* and social media had not happened at that time, but the sight of young people walking around with laptops was strong and they had one of those in the group: the tenor, Nick Begbie, who was very interested in new technology. Our scholarship assistance is quite flexible and we want it to go to the end result of improving the musical quality. It did not matter if someone went away and studied something non-musical as long as that study was related to the end result. Nick wanted to explore using technology to get to an audience and the place to do it was not Australia. Also, the group wanted to consider how they could improve their overall style and presentation by looking at other groups acknowledged as benchmarks in the *acapella* world.

With assistance from the Trust, they went to study one-on-one with members of *The Real Group*, in America, and with individual people like the *Manhattan Transfer*. At the same time, Nick studied techniques of using computers to access an audience. When they came back, they had achieved two things. Their performance was far more sophisticated, very American and very



The Idea of North in 2004, (L-R) Nick Begbie, Naomi Crellin, Andrew Piper and Trish Delaney-Brown

tight. The good things had been enhanced even more and any bad aspects had disappeared. Their approach was completely different and their confidence was at the highest level. They had already started their internet and Nick found he could talk to these people. He was smart, had obviously learned or thought it through to make it personal, before *Facebook* and social media. He could personalize emails to remind attendees they been to a concert before and there was another one coming up. This personal contact built them an audience and very quickly they had a database of over 3,000 people, all of whom had been to their concerts and had expressed an interest in hearing about the next concert. So as they toured around Australia they got the database from Victoria or Melbourne or Perth and sent emails to all of those people in a personal way. The result was sold out performances and they did that at the Independent, our first sell-out. They came pretty much once every year and they had 98-99% capacity every time. This was a combination of the scholarship assistance pointing them in the right direction. They did the rest, developing their IT marketing tools and communication skills and developing their product and consolidating it with concerts. The year after our study they went back to the States and competed in the inter-college competition for *acapella* groups. *Acapella* in America in the college circuit is at the top of anything you can achieve and they wiped the slate clean. They took out the Best Group in the States in the entire college circuit competition. From that point on they just kept going. They had regular tours of Asia, Europe and the US, alongside their Australian program. I think we helped them get to that point. Members have changed; replaced by other interesting musicians who are contributing in their own way.

The Independent was a mechanism to help musicians find their audience. From word go, our objective was to help musicians, singers and conductors, initially by giving them study grants to go overseas and that has not changed but one can do more than that in subtle ways and one of these was buying the Independent, doing it up, giving it as a vehicle for them and encouraging them and giving them access. I think with the Independent we are in chapter one of recordings; it is an area yet to flourish. I produced several recordings there, including one with the Parramatta City Brass Band which turned out very well. I did quite a few impromptu recordings, not commercially released, for people who came in. What it needs now is someone to recognize you can get a good product from there and give the support mechanism for distribution. CDs are slowly dying and new media will determine the direction. All of these are unknowns but one of the best recordings was of the *New Sydney Wind Quintet*, produced by composer/producer **Lyle Chan**, who had been with *ABC Classics*. He liked the room. They did the recording before we had the sound shells in and the result was spectacular. They did it on the stage with no audience. It demonstrates what the room is capable of and with the sound shells it would have been enhanced by another 50%. I believe it is waiting for the right person to come along.

When we were there with *Musica Viva* there was a relationship with *2MBS-FM* who recorded every concert which went to air a week or so later.⁵ Some of our own events were recorded by *2MBS-FM*, the result was a recording and they had the opportunity to air play it. You have to be very careful when you record there because there is still outside noise a recording environment can pick up, but if you pick the time of day with the sound shells in place, you can get a studio quality recording. When any young engineer comes in and hears that room they always remark how fabulous it is.

We were on the eve of the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) in 2008 but the theatre returned a sizeable profit, the only profit it has ever made. About \$200,000, it came from a corporate source. It was very encouraging. Then we were hit with the impact of global problems: corporates dried up overnight and some went to the wall. *Sun Microsystems* was a major client of ours. It disappeared completely; the Americans just shut down Australia completely as far as I know. We took a dive immediately and in the first quarter of 2009, while we had in the past a sizeable amount of income potential for that quarter, there was virtually nothing. This was part of the global pattern. In addition we were developing the program which clearly was not going to contribute any profit to the building, nor cover the cost of increased maintenance. We were at a stage when we could expect a loss every year on the building. Given the age of the building (a theatre since 1911), we had to take positive action on maintenance.

Looking after the Building

We did corrective and preventative maintenance where necessary, but there were still areas, for example the guttering on the roof at the back of the theatre, untouched because all resources had gone into the performing area for the corporates. There had been water damage to the backstage door; it was through the back of the theatre substantially. Correcting that was probably about \$200,000 to \$300,000. Another item was the air-conditioning system in the theatre. It was not functioning as it should have. There were serious problems only to be rectified by replacing the chiller tower compressor and rerouting some of the ducts. We were reliant entirely on corporate income to make a profit unless our music policy changed, and I was not prepared to recommend this to the directors. Only a handful of concerts sold out, not enough to cover yearly maintenance costs; that has to come from the corporate sector. By 2012 we had a serious problem. By then the Trust had invested and lost in the theatre nearly a quarter of a million dollars. To continue would pull the Trust down. Without maintenance the theatre would deteriorate. Then one side of the air conditioning chiller system broke completely. We

⁵ *2MBS-FM* - Fine Music 102.5, Sydney music radio station operated by Music Broadcasting Society of NSW Cooperative, a community radio launched in December 1974. It is Australia's first fully licensed FM radio station.

were running on half capacity and getting complaints from audiences about it being too cold or too hot, depending on the season. People are very happy to complain about air-conditioning. We were able to troubleshoot most of those things but it was an issue which had to be addressed. To effectively replace it we were looking at between a quarter and a half million dollars. Beyond us. Or we could have done it but it would have flattened us out and more important to us was what we were doing with the music development, our scholars.

At that point, the directors made an almost immediate decision to sell. I had mixed feelings but could see the reality. I did not want to see it deteriorate or pulled down because we could not do maintenance. We did not want audiences staying away because the air-conditioning was uncomfortable. The outcomes were all negative to me. On the other hand, having worked so hard to turn it into a working performance space, it was a worry to me that we would lose the space. We would not lose access to it; we would have access like any other hirer, which was the approach the directors took. They wanted to remain supportive of the buyer. We had not reached the decision to sell but we could not afford to pay for the air-conditioning which had to be done sooner or later. There was recognition of the work put in to make the building significant and its role in the development of young musicians. We were in the first couple of years of this development. If we continued doing programs such as the one in 2012, it had to be worth it.

I am pleased some of those groups are now well known. The rest should be household names in the next ten years and that is really what we wanted, quietly supporting in the background. It was a dilemma for me but I was charged with the responsibility of making sure money the Trust spent was not wasted. I had to come up with a balanced budget every year and we were getting to a point where the Trust was underwriting and supplementing the loss in the Independent. Each year it had to comply with insolvency laws, the directors had to declare they would underwrite whatever losses the *Independent (Sydney) Pty Ltd* would bear and they willingly did that every January in compliance with ASIC requirements but it was clear each year that amount was going to increase. We did find a satisfactory solution but at the time it was a dilemma. We closed 2011 with a question mark over what to do. The directors would not make decisions subjectively. They wanted to see the end of year profit or loss, and make a decision when they understand why that profit or loss had been made.

As the Independent Theatre's role as a music venue developed, there was an increasing financial problem. As the Annual Reports show, in 2010 the Trust registered a loss of \$214,000, in 2011 it was \$250,000 and in 2012, \$438,000. With this loss and potential expenses, the directors could see the folly of continuing. Unfortunately, before this situation was apparent, I had worked on a concept of the theatre providing not only music performance but also being a centre for musical development.

The Small Group Music Performance program

The program was to be called the Small Group Music Performance (SGMP), which included Australian compositions. The aim was to have several areas of expertise reporting to a central source. There was the potential for recordings, more musical events and to build an audience for these. I hoped for the situation where people came because it was an event at the Independent rather than only attending to hear a particular group or person. It was a concept we thought could work well if we had enough to offer. Another area was vocal development for singers. Lisa Roberts had been an artist-in-residence, building an interest in singers attending the Independent and singing there. There were education opportunities. We had a strong relationship with Wenona School next door. In 2010 the Head of Music expressed a desire to work with the theatre so students would have opportunities to experience professional performance standards and appreciate good pianos and acoustics.

Then there were composers. There was no one place where you hear the work of our composers. **The Australian Music Centre** promotes Australian music through scores and recordings but is a collection centre rather than a meeting place. We hoped the Independent might become a meeting place, provide a composers' forum. We also wanted a place for soloists, including our scholars, to develop their talent. All these aspects could be gathered in one place, managed and developed by the Trust with the assistance of experts in various areas. I had put together a vision articulating the details of such an approach. Without the financial imperative to rethink the Independent, this might well have gone ahead and made a great contribution to the Australian music scene. It would not necessarily have been confined to Sydney given the interest of international artists appearing with us. By 2012 there was a financial problem, containable, however, if we changed the use of the theatre and our approach. We had developed it as a music venue which had already shown it would not be profitable for drama. There were technical issues that worked against successful drama presentations. It could only accommodate small casts and minimal scenic effects without a tower. The audience capacity was not attractive to drama promoters. The majority of people thought 1000 seats were necessary to break even on anything.

The Independent stage set for a Wenona School music ensemble concert.



Wenona School

We had stayed focussed throughout the renovations on creating a perfect chamber music venue with 300 seats. We had been wooing the corporate sector to use the venue which had been reasonably successful and a reason why the losses were not greater. They were paying for the running and most of the maintenance of the building, but there was still an ongoing loss. We were fortunate that circumstance pointed us in a certain direction. I was working on a set-up one day when a gentleman walked through the open back doors. We often had such visitors because many people had an association at some time with the Independent, mostly from their schooldays. He had not seen the renovation, was pleased with the transformation and expressed an interest in buying the building if it was for sale. He had been in the market for it when the theatre was sold to Rodney Seaborn. He had other property in the area and wanted to buy it for commercial purposes. He was not interested in running a theatre and most likely would have changed the use of the site. I passed his card on to the directors which led to their thinking we should perhaps sell the Independent rather than run a music program at a loss, even though it was good musically. By 2012 we had planned over 80 concerts. When thinking who might buy it, there was concern that the purchaser would at least honour the work we had done and use it in the way we intended. You cannot dictate to a buyer but you can try to find someone who would appreciate what you were doing. We were in the middle of Wenona School campus with their buildings on three sides of the Independent. Nearly the entire block belonged to the school, except for the theatre and the flats to one side. We thought Sydney's oldest extant theatre, now in great condition, would be rather a jewel for a good school to have on their campus. Wenona School was interested. The negotiations took some time but we never publicly listed the building. Contracts were exchanged by the end of 2012 and the sale finalized in 2013. We moved out in December 2013. It was agreed we would stay on as theatre manager for several months to help Wenona as they took over the operation.

The Trust recouped its renovation costs and from January 1st 2014 had no responsibility for the Independent. We dealt with the intellectual property rights to retain the name with the venue. I had spent time getting the visuals and trademark for the Independent established with a logo and sign, characters which were musically orientated and did not want that to disappear. We did not want to take it with us and suggested they take the name of the Independent. We assigned a licence for them to use the logo and gave them the Independent website, which had built a database of around 3000 people who had attended events and were regular attendees. Attached to the website was a ticketing service facility, from an outsourced party but accessed through our website. There was no money involved, it was just goodwill, and we assigned the relevant rights to them. We hold intellectual property on some of the characters but the sign on the front of **The Independent**, and on the doors throughout the theatre, remains with Wenona.

Wenona sought for the Trust to continue to support ten concerts through the *Easy Access* program which was providing concessional access for musicians to build audiences. It was up to them whether they did it but we were trying to remove the financial burden while they did so. Under our management they could have the space rent free if they did not reach a certain box office target. If they did make the target the rent would be minimal and they took away the profit. So there was an incentive for them to work on building audiences. They did not have marketing budgets but there were things they could do. The access was conditional and if they chose not to do anything they did not get the *Easy Access* next time. Most were conscientious to varying degrees of success depending on the vision of those involved and their understanding of marketing, publicity and resources. Some had friends and parents who could guide and give practical help. Others did not have any access but everyone tried. Had we stayed, the Independent would have been helping the musicians in marketing their material through the website and mailing lists.

We did not know how many groups would want to continue this process and when we lost control over the negotiation, once Wenona decided what prices they were going to charge, we could not be involved anymore. However, the directors decided we did not want to walk away and leave them in the lurch so we agreed to keep this offer open to underwrite the costs of up to ten concerts a year. It was not our intention to put these concerts on, although we left it open to be able to put on a concert to celebrate something like our Diamond Jubilee. For the first year we underwrote the ten concerts which mostly went well enough for them not to have to call on our money. The next year no group came forward so they had sorted out their relationship with Wenona's Independent.

We still have the view that we want to help events at the Independent and to that end we still underwrite the Sydney Independent Opera. If they do not get a certain box office we pay their hire fee. In October 2015 their production of *Tosca* came under that regime. They have built their audience now to a reasonable size, getting between 80 and 120 people, which is nearly half the house, having started with 40. We are able to give them reassurance that if things go horribly bad they will not lose the house.

Alan Rendell, who provided an audience development service for us, was employed as part of our bigger plan to employ a facilitator in each area of the Small Group Music Performance scheme. We started with audience development, the core source of funding. Alan joined a year before we sold. His particular skills included developing and administering websites. He fine-tuned the ticket service as it constantly changed and improved. He was building profiles of tickets buyers and target marketing those people, with their permission. He also put together the printed catalogue of 2012 events. The advance work for this was scheduling dates and planning

marketing support. Alan would attend nearly all performances, meeting and greeting people in the foyer and talking to them about what they wanted. He was the public face of the concert, not necessarily the Trust but the concert. If the *Seraphim Trio* were on he would be in the foyer, talking to people about how good they were and how to book now for the next one. Without hard selling he would move around and get feedback for the players on repertoire. He put the website together which we gave to Wenona, and then devised the new Trust website.

