

Ngarra-Burria 2020

First Peoples Composers

The Old 505 Theatre, 4th November

Will Kepa *Ailan Opping* (2020)

Ailan Opping, a simple creole (Broken English) way of saying 'Island Hopping', is a journey from an outer island in the Torres Strait, into the Main Hub or Central Port which is Thursday Island, affectionately known as T.I. The journey begins early in the morning, the sea is calm, most of the villagers are still asleep, but excitement gradually becomes of the children and the family who are gearing up to set off in their high-speed 65 horsepower dinghy. The morning sun glistens across the water and it doesn't take long for the wind to pick up, spraying the sea off the front bow into the morning faces of the children onboard. They travel through uncertain weather, cautiously riding on top off shallow reefs, taking breaks on many of the uninhabited islands or sand cays to seek shelter and have a rest, refuelling the petrol tanks, and maybe stop in to visit other family members on another island, before reaching their final destination, safe and sound.

Will Kepa is a Torres Strait Islander multi-instrumentalist, audio engineer and producer based in Cairns, Far North Queensland. He is a much sought-after musician (drums, bass, guitar and ukulele), songwriter and arranger, and has performed with the likes of Johnos Blues Band, Phil Emmanuel and One Drop Reggae. His skills have taken him to many of the major festivals around the country as well as overseas. He has been the musical director of 'Tanderrum', the Melbourne festival opening ceremony for three years running, sound designer for various Ilbijerri productions as well as City of Melbourne commissions. He has performed on tours as a part of the Black Arm Band, Archie Roach's 'Into the Bloodstream' tour, and Buried Country's national tour.. He has also worked as an electronic music producer, DJ and songwriting workshop facilitator.

Will identifies as a Kulkalgal man from lama (Yam Island), on his Mothers' side, and a Meriam man from the Seisarem Tribe of Erub (Darnley Island) on his Fathers' side. Totems are Umay (Dog), Deumer (Booby Bird) and Dabor (Mackerel).

Nardi Simpson *Blaktopia* (2020)

The piece aims to deconstruct my 20 years of musical training, in particular tendencies that are a hallmark of my folk music experience; conventional tempo, relational harmony and sonic resolution. *Blaktopia* is an attempt to decolonise my trained, 'western' ear and to create a sonic landscape that is naturally uneasy, discordant and uncomplimentary.

Nardi Simpson *Burruguu* (2020)

Burruguu is the Yuwaalaraay word for 'Time of Creation.' I am playing with this concept as not only a musical reference to the beginnings of Aboriginal time (the Lore, the dreaming or everywhen), but also an embodiment of the immediate point of musical creation, allowing space for the ensemble to create within the piece. Ngarra-Burria brings the final piece to this puzzle- its continued growth and development, a promise to the future. *Burruguu* is all around us, yesterday, today and tomorrow.

Nardi Simpson *Of Stars and Birds* (2020)

Of Stars and Birds was written after an invitation to contribute to Ensemble Offspring's birdsong collection. As a new composer in the earliest development stages of my craft, I worried how my work would stand alongside the pieces of experienced, accomplished composers who had already contributed to this series. As an Aboriginal musician with limited music theory, I also worried if I could create something of a standard suitable for the ensemble and its project partners. In times like this I look to culture to provide guidance. I quickly realised Yuwaalaraay knowledge, connection and relationship to birds equalled the complexity and detail of advanced musical theory, compositional practice and creative conception. So I worked hard to imbue this piece with the things I know well, cultural concepts and knowledge, enabling a transformation away from a commissioned composition and into an extension of my own lived and practiced cultural experience.

Of Stars and Birds developed then from a significant Yuwaalaraay story ending in the creation of the southern cross but traversing the enormity of land, lore, death and rebirth. Birds weave this story into our dreaming cosmos, the conventional limitations of earth, sky, death, day, life and night dissolving and creating its own universe of existence- a bit like my compositional craft, a mixture of traditions and teachings, an extension of the storytelling and songmaking of Australia's First People's and the explorations and expressions of a new composer at the beginning of an exciting musical journey.

Nardi Simpson is a Yuwaalaray writer, musician, composer and educator from NSW's North West freshwater plains. A founding member of Indigenous folk duo Stiff Gins, Nardi has been performing nationally and internationally for the past twenty years. A participant of Ngarra-Burria since 2019, she writes about her experience:

"Ngarra-Burria, put simply, has reinvigorated my ears, my mind and my spirit. It is not only a music program. It is a program about cultural responsibility,

about singing land and story and country, and about what we Yuwaalaraay call the strengthening of *dhuwi* - our deepest breath, our essence - our soul."

James Henry *The Rains* (2020)

I started writing for Ensemble Offspring during drought breaking rains in the first half of 2020. Not long before, I walked across the dry riverbed in Walgett for the first time – where my family is from. So seeing images of water flowing down the Namoi, Barwon and Darling for the first time in a long time gave me a feeling of optimism which I felt coming through when writing this piece.

James Henry *Zoom Meeting* (2020)

Zoom Meeting came out of an exercise we were given by Chris to write a piece with restricted pitch scale. I wrote a minute's worth and noticed how the back and forth with the melody reminded me of Zoom meetings. I had been involved with a few Zoom meetings during this time for work, friends and family. I then saw it worth extending the 1-minute exercise in to a full 3-minute piece and representing more elements of the *Zoom Meeting* musically.

James Henry is a Melbourne based composer & sound designer who blends the music of the First Peoples of Australia with modern electronic productions to produce a truly unique and stirring sound.

Brenda Gifford *Yawa (Talk)* (2020)

Yawa (*talk* in Dhurga) is about the way we communicate. Nature talks to us through the winds, we talk to each other through music and we are talking to each other though silences and breath. It is universal.

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. She was a member of the Band Mixed Relations with Bart Willoughby from No Fixed Address. She is Ensemble Offspring's First Nations Composer in Residence for 2020 and part of the first Ngarra-Burria cohort.

Marlene Cummins *Past, present, so what (now)* (2020)

I incorporated flavours of John Coltrane, Miles Davis & Jim Pepper because I listen to them a lot as a saxophonist. I have outlined what it was like and what it will be like in 4 distinct sections:

1. Harmonious relationship with Mother Earth & Animals
2. Invasion – *a rising crescendo of drumming of encroaching punitive hunting parties.*

3. Stillness then Mourning – *following the massacres & attempted genocide. Mourning music could be reminiscent of Coltrane's The Prayer and/or Jim Pepper's (Native American saxophonist) Lakota Lament.*
4. So what now – *a light pun on Miles Davis. The question is put to all of us to work.*

I'm healing this Nation's scars.

Marlene Cummins is Australia's foremost First People's blues performer. She is a singer, songwriter, musician, painter, broadcaster, actor, dancer and activist who was born in the southwest Queensland town of Cunnamulla. Marlene is a proud kuku yalanji, and Woppaburra woman, who expresses herself through her music and art.

Eric Avery *Gliding* (2020)

With direct influences from minimal composers such as Steve Reich, Eric Avery's quartet epitomises the act of gliding through music. All the sonic material is supported by the cello (with Avery's experience as a string player himself) which plays J.S. Bach *Cello Suite*-style figures, actively and repetitively crossing the strings while the other 3 musicians are also constantly moving with their semiquaver patterns. Reminiscent of birds soaring in the sky, never stopping, constantly moving, twisting and turning in the air, *Gliding* is music with total weightlessness.

Eric Avery is a Ngiyampaa (nee-yam-pa), Yuin, Bundjalung and Gum-ban-girr artist. As part of his practice Eric plays the violin, dances and composes music. Working with his family's custodial songs he seeks to revive and continue on an age-old legacy – continuing the tradition of singing in his tribe – utilising his talents to combine and create an experience of his peoples culture. Violinist and contemporary dancer Eric Avery's practice explores the relationship between First People's and non-First People's forms and narratives through the combination of dance and music.