

Brett Dean: in conversation

Interview by
Miranda Cass
ANAM Marketing Coordinator

As ANAM's former Artistic Director, what do you most look forward to about returning to ANAM's home at the South Melbourne Town Hall?

Once you've been a part of the ANAM family, to return always feels like coming home. Now I know that might sound like an artist-interview cliché but it's really true. You only need to look at the vast array of returning national and international artists that have maintained ongoing relationships with ANAM over many years, even decades, to see it's not mere marketing! To be part of the very particular ANAM vibe again is what builds these lasting bonds and is what I'm most looking forward to, with the wonderful mix amongst its musicians of curiosity, wonder, skill and ambition.

Earlier this year, you were invited to be a keynote speaker to welcome the new and returning musicians to Week One at ANAM. During this talk, you encouraged the musicians to open their minds to the diverse options that are available for musicians and you reflected on when you were a violist in the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra but devoted your spare time to improvising. It was an inspiring part of your talk and it offered a great insight into how you shaped your life and career. Can you briefly repeat it here for our readers?

My early years in the Berlin Philharmonic were characterised by discovery. That meant, in the first instance, a crash-course in the extensive repertoire of Germany's leading 'Kultur-orchester' and lots of chamber music. But from about 1988 onwards it also meant 'after-dark' improvising sessions with the marvellously versatile Sydney musician, Simon Hunt. Simon was just about to achieve fame/notoriety as Pauline Pantsdown, the irreverent, dizzily articulate 'caricature/nemesis' of at-the-time-newly-elected One Nation leader, Pauline Hanson. So, after playing a Bruckner Symphony at 8pm in the Philharmonie for example, I would often meet up with Simon and head to the bohemian Kreuzberg district of West Berlin to challenge myself to post-philharmonic improv sessions featuring viola, piano-frame, sampler and any number of other noise-makers. Simon's adventurous spirit and encouragement eventually led me to begin writing my first notated compositions.



Between the viola, conducting and composing, what are you dedicating most of your time to now? (Or do all three roles intertwine?)

Proportionally, I spend most of my time composing however all three disciplines are constant companions and cross-pollinating in character. I simply can't imagine only composing without performing, or vice-versa. As a composer I find it incredibly helpful to have a hands-on knowledge of the act of performing. Similarly, I think all performers should at least 'have a crack' at composing, to experience first-hand what musical challenges and conundrums arise, what decisions need to be made and how composers make them. It can only help to inform and inspire the art of interpreting music. And it just might become your main gig!

You're known as an advocate for Australian music and we're delighted to have you conduct four Australian works (including one of your own) with the ANAM Orchestra in November. Can you describe how the program for this concert was formed?

These four orchestral scores are all particularly dear to me as both performer and composer. The works of Richard Meale, Georges Lentz and Lisa Illean have featured in my programs before, most recently in an all-Australian studio concert I conducted with the BBC Symphony Orchestra in their London home in Maida Vale. It was on that occasion that I experienced how well these composers' works spoke or sang to one another, even though they display a great diversity of compositional voices and styles. Meale's *Clouds Now and Then* is a modern Australian classic that displays his sophisticated, cosmopolitan ear for sonorities. And I commissioned Lisa Illean's beautifully subtle *Land's End* as part of my recent residency with the Sydney Symphony.

The only work I haven't conducted before is Georges Lentz's extraordinary and mesmerising *Jerusalem (after Blake)*, here receiving its second performance ever in Australia.

After its world premiere in the UK in 2017 and its Australian premiere at the Adelaide Festival earlier this year, your *Hamlet* opera has taken the musical world by storm. Can you tell us more about the particular piece that the ANAM Orchestra will perform with Lorina Gore and Topi Lehtipuu?

From Melodious Lay is a 25-minute suite of music from my *Hamlet* opera, focusing in particular on the nature of the relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia. Ostensibly Lorina sings Ophelia and Topi is Hamlet, though not exclusively, as the two vocal lines also explore views on this relationship as expressed by other major characters in the play: Hamlet's mother Gertrude and Ophelia's father Polonius, for example. It's highly dramatic stuff!

What's next for your *Hamlet*? And what else is coming up for you?

I'm very excited to say that *Hamlet* is scheduled for more performances in Europe and the United States in the coming few years. Following the Australian premiere in Adelaide last March there are currently no future plans for further performances here in Australia however I really do hope that Melbourne audiences might get to see the entire opera one day. In the meantime I'm working on other new (and slightly smaller!) projects: a new string quartet for the Doric Quartet to be premiered by them on their first national Musica Viva tour next year, and I'll also be presenting a new work of mine with the ACO in 2019; a mini double-violino concerto which is closely linked to Bach's Brandenburg Concerto no. 6.

Finally, what would you say to encourage someone to see the ANAM Orchestra perform on 9 November?

Look, I'm a tad biased of course, being one of the four composers, but I have to say this is a very special program of new music. It's evocative, imaginative and sensuous, yet also highly dramatic and darkly haunting. And how often do we get to immerse ourselves in an entire evening of Australian orchestral music? I do hope people embrace this rare opportunity, which should also prove a great vehicle to show the versatility and thrilling power of ANAM's wonderful orchestra together with two stellar vocal soloists.

CELEBRATING BRETT DEAN

Friday 9 November 7.30pm

MEALE *Clouds Now and Then*
B DEAN *From Melodious Lay*
(*A Hamlet Diffraction*)
ILLEAN *Land's End*
LENTZ *Jerusalem (after Blake)*

Lorina Gore soprano
Topi Lehtipuu tenor
Brett Dean conductor
ANAM Orchestra

Venue Elisabeth Murdoch Hall,
Melbourne Recital Centre

Tickets Full \$50 Sen/Con \$40

Bookings anam.com.au
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Brett Dean's ANAM residency
is generously supported by
Kerry Landman

The 2018 ANAM at Melbourne
Recital Centre series is generously
supported by Loris Orthwein