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What's in a festival? The art of programming

By [Piers Lane](#) on Jul 17, 2012 filed under [Classical Music](#) | [Comments](#)

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Never forget that "the oldies are the goodies", but also that "variety is the spice of life".

I'm off to Hobart to record concertos by Malcolm Williamson with the Tasmanian Symphony for the Hyperion label in London. My partner in crime will be Howard Shelley, the British conductor and pianist of surpassing natural musicality and intelligence. It will be a week of intense concentration, culminating in a public performance of the second concerto on Saturday night.



Piers Lane

Australian-born, London-based pianist Piers Lane reflects on the ins and outs of directing the Australian Festival of Chamber Music in Townsville.

Keywords

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The following day, overseas artists for the Australian Festival of Chamber Music will start to arrive in Australia. Some won't arrive until Wednesday the 25th, the first day of rehearsals. As always, they'll somehow cope with the crazily demanding schedule of rehearsals and performances – but those who can, and who know what jetlag means, will get here as early as possible!

Williamson's Second Concerto will feature in the Governor's Gala concert on the first Saturday evening of the festival. It is orchestrated just for strings, so it qualifies as a "chamber" concerto and will complement a second half of zany and attractive Aussie pieces by Nigel Westlake and Matthew Hindson, with the Goldner String Quartet and the Camerata of St John's hotting things up in Hindson's *The Rave and the Nightingale*, where disco meets Schubert!

That's not a bad representation of what it's like programming the festival as a whole. I try to be as eclectic and inclusive as possible, within the bounds of chamber music. We haven't any jazz in the 2012 Festival, but there's just about everything else, from Telemann's two-violin concerto (a favourite of Suzuki string students) to the Band of Brothers improvising on guitars, oud and req, and Katie Noonan and Karin Schaupp proffering contemporary Aussie pop as part of a far-ranging Antipodean survey in their *Songs of the Southern Skies* collaboration.

Choosing the festival repertoire and the artists to perform it is a fascinating process. Often ideas I have early on don't eventuate for one reason or another and have to await presentation in a different year. Sometimes, little lateral shifts of thought take months to occur. I might suddenly realise, "That piece doesn't *have* to go there – why not put it *there* instead?"

Every year, the office conducts audience surveys as the festival finishes and inevitably people mention their wish-lists for future festivals. During the festivals themselves, I am frequently accosted by eager audience members, who usually start off with fulsome compliments, but then add, a little wistfully, "It's a pity there's no Mozart this year – he's my favourite!"

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or, "Of course, I love piano trios best and there's only one in this year's program..."

I'm sure punters realise it's impossible to program something of all their favourite forms and composers in every festival – but I listen and I try! I attempt to cover every period of chamber music each year and to schedule a few core favourites. Certain pieces might crop up every second year – like Schubert's String Quintet or *The Trout*, or Mendelssohn's Octet – but other important works by major composers have to take their chance with lesser-known works by those same composers, or major works by lesser-known composers – or even lesser-known works by lesser-known composers!

Festival repertoire should be entertaining, welcoming, moving and cozy overall, but should also expose us to composers and pieces we may not have encountered before. As long as they are presented with integrity and in a communicative and exciting way, audiences will often discover gems they hadn't anticipated. I was delighted last year when Martin Wesley-Smith, the 2011 Composer-in-Residence, took people by surprise with his politically provocative *Weapons of Mass Distortion* for clarinet and tape, immaculately realised by British clarinetist Michael Collins. It wasn't what people were expecting over their morning coffee, but they *loved* it!

And in 2007, I programmed (with a tad of trepidation!) Harrison Birtwhistle's 20-minute *The Axe Manual* for percussion and piano. Claire Edwardes and Bernadette Balkus slaved over the preparation of this monster piece. The results were riveting: the sheer precision of ensemble, Claire's inevitable dance around her instruments and the intensity and range of colours and rhythms made people leap to their feet as it ended, out of admiration and visceral thrill. Often people say they don't like contemporary music, but, if presented in the right circumstances, it can be as communicative and telling as Schubert, of course.

Programming requires a delicate balance. I remember Nicholas Kenyon, former Director of the Proms in London, telling me that if he programmed one rare or contemporary piece in three, it affected audience size adversely – but one in four, people accepted. I've tended to use that as a rule-of-thumb when programming for Townsville, bearing in mind that "the oldies are the goodies", but also that "variety is the spice of life".

Choosing artists to provide that variety is another sensitive business! More on that next blog...

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Agreed. How interesting if we could hear whatever the artists themselves select to play - provided, of course, they did not ALL select the same music!

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