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## Picking the talent for Townsville

By [Piers Lane](#) on Jul 26, 2012 (3 days ago) filed under [Classical Music](#) | [Comments](#)

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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

townsville, australian, festival, chambermusic, piers, lane

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August, 2012 issue on

### One the eve of the 2012 Australian Festival of Chamber Music, Piers Lane discusses the delicate art of finding musicians who will play happily together.

Having returned yesterday from a huge week in Hobart, recording from Tuesday to Saturday with the inspiringly focused, musicianly and unceasingly energetic Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra under Howard Shelley, I realised with a sudden lurch of anticipation, the AFCM starts later this week! It is suddenly upon us and Atle Sponberg, fab violinist from Norway and the equally dazzling UK pianist Kathy Stott, have already arrived up North. It's now Monday breakfast time and I am in a plane headed for Townsville. I had just taken my seat when I noticed a steward quibbling with a passenger about too much hand luggage.

Looking up, I first spotted two violin cases – and then the smiling face of Leo Phillips, who *was* allowed on, violin cases and all, in the end! I last bumped into him in New Zealand late last year, as I had done the previous year. Before that, it was ages since I'd seen him, but I cherished vivid memories of performing with him as leader of the Vellinger String Quartet.

One of the most pleasant aspects of my job as Artistic Director of the AFCM is being in a position to invite performers I admire and like to play in Townsville. There are always many considerations and it's not just a matter of contacting famous names to check for availability and interest – far from it, in fact. Every week of the year, the office and I receive information from agents promoting their artists and encouraging me to invite them. Surprisingly often, it's as if they haven't checked out the website to see what actually happens in Townsville. They'll send reviews or sample programmes of solo concerts, with no mention of chamber music activities at all. Chamber music requires a particular sort of artist. I find it a complete anathema when directors plonk five star soloists together in a festival, to hack through the Brahms Quintet, say, or the Schumann. Inevitably there is a certain frisson, but musically often for the wrong reasons. Everyone is playing in technicolour tone with hyper energy, or showing they can 'do' chamber music with exaggerated softness – whatever, there's a self-consciousness in the presentation that sometimes eclipses the music itself. There is nothing more magical than a great and experienced quartet, long past individual ego considerations, essaying a masterpiece for the xth time and within seconds taking the listener into the music for a profound and penetrating experience.

In festivals like the AFCM, finances, along with ethos, mean that we can't bring from overseas and within Australia a dozen or so mature ensembles to give a concert or two of their core repertoire – the way Musica Viva might during an overall annual season. We provide programming depth and breadth during our ten days of music-making, through artists being mixed and matched in all sorts of combinations, usually in three concerts a day, along with masterclasses and other events. The players require certain special qualities in order for it to work. With my current artistic and

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travel budget, I am able to bring just under a third of the players (and that has to include plane seats for cellos too!) from foreign parts, the rest from within Oz. The audience is particularly interested in the overseas players, because they have more ready access to the Aussies throughout the year. But if I can only hire eight to ten overseas players (depending on the number of cellists), it really limits my possibilities if I import a string quartet or a wind quintet – I tend to invite individual players to complement groups or other performers from Australia. These players should ideally be well-known internationally, specially as chamber players, with the experience to 'get things together' quickly. They will already have played most of the repertoire in other situations and recorded some of it; will have the stamina to cope with the tiring international journey and subsequent short recovery period, before settling into a crazily non-stop rehearsal and performance schedule; will have a positive approach and a personality that can immediately fit in and work with other musicians; will have the sort of charisma that will inspire their new colleagues and that will charm audiences hearing them and meeting them day after day during the festival. True chamber musicians are usually, by virtue of their innate sharing musicianship, good colleagues and often intuitive psychologists! They sometimes have to get their own way in (sometimes unspoken) musical arguments through discreet and even devious means! Upsetting colleagues during rehearsals is not on in festival situations – there isn't time to work through problems like that. Everyone must aim at the final result in double quick time and cope with little compromises along the way. Festival audiences tend to create a sort of relaxed euphoria and the festival goes on. They get tired, but don't want to miss out on anything! It is invaluable if players genuinely enjoy personal interactions with them.

It only makes things difficult if players act like "divas". We all love "personalities", but if players, no matter how wonderful on stage, cause problems with volunteers, on whom so much responsibility rests for the smooth running of the event – or if they don't co-operate easily with the backstage crew, who have a mighty task for every event, with instrumental setups changed for every piece and sensitive timings to be handled, so that ABC live broadcasts can proceed smoothly – then they are not right for the festival situation. All in all, I feel I have to know personally how potential AFCM performers work in similar conditions. I need to know their playing and personalities well, so that I can successfully match them with other compatible players. I need to know how they react to the pressures of performing under duress and often with minimal rehearsal. I need to be sure they maintain goodwill and equanimity with challenging schedules; that they will provide fascinating and articulate responses when I interview them for the Concert Conversations series; that they will be technically and musically masterly – an obvious requirement. I need to be able to shape any particular year's musical community, so that everyone will feel relaxed and "in tune" with at least a handful of colleagues and hopefully many more.

Since 2007, when I took over the directing reins, I have tried to increase the breadth of the repertoire presented. With strings and piano as a basis always, I like to include a full range of wind instruments and some brass, with frequent use of voice, percussion, and harp – as well as didgeridu because of our unique position in the world – while alternating use of "luxury" chamber music additions like guitar or sax or harp, or even oud and req this year! With an artistic budget that hasn't altered hugely over the past few years, this means "taking with one hand while giving with the other". It's always something of a jigsaw puzzle, putting together a comprehensive programme, mixing overseas and Aussie artists who'll like each other and play superbly together in a short time, whose travel and accommodation costs will tally with predetermined budgets, whose music hire costs won't prove prohibitive, whose schedules will allow participation in a far-flung realm during the busy European and US summertime, and so on and so on. When it all finally comes together and – fingers crossed – it works, there's nothing more gratifying and heartwarming: the previous year's hard work is worth everything.

We've just landed in Townsville! The sun is out – it's 25 degrees – it's all systems go.

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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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