

SPOTLIGHT

LEAH CURTIS, 44, is an Australian composer living in Los Angeles. Her new work for the Southern Cross Soloists didgeridoo commissioning project will premiere in Brisbane



INTERVIEW BY Bridget Cormack

You've written a new work, titled *The Ground*, in collaboration with didgeridoo virtuoso Chris Williams. Why aren't there many works for didgeridoo and chamber ensemble?

There are a lot more for didgeridoo and orchestra by composers such as Peter Sculthorpe, Sean O'Boyle, William Barton, Paul Stanhope and Ross Edwards. Chamber ensemble is a really unique gathering of players on stage, especially with the Southern Cross Soloists, because they're all virtuosic individuals. Each instrument is very exposed. Why hasn't it been done before? I don't know. But it's a wonderful opportunity to explore a whole new soundscape together. Sharing the stage with performers and cultures is really special.

Nicole Kidman was criticised by some Aboriginal figures for trying to play a didgeridoo in 2008 because traditionally women were banned from playing the instrument. What kind of cultural sensitivities did you navigate when writing your composition?

Didgeridoo virtuoso Chris Williams generously invited me into this unique collaboration. He is a descendant of the

Wakka Wakka people of Queensland, and has led the path on how the instrument will exist in our work, which he will be performing live. There is a shared empathy across cultures and music in this project, with deep listening, connecting and learning woven through all stages of our collaborative process together. For Chris, it's extremely important to be involved in the process as much as possible (for this piece and all future pieces written) so the instrument and the Indigenous Australian culture is respected, honoured and presented in a sensitive and appropriate way.

How do you score for improvisation?

Indications for didgeridoo would be, for example, airy, ethereal sounds at the very opening of the piece, so it could be a textural reference. Chris would then interpret what that means through performance. We also have a theme carrying through the piece where Chris plays a drone and sings this short melodic line at the same time. This has been something really quite magical to hear Chris play.

You grew up in Canberra, where your father came from a sheep-farming

background and your mother was a piano teacher. How did you become a composer?

I started writing for productions of Shakespeare at high school. One year they had a competition for a composition and the prize was a trip to England. I made it all the way through to the finals and got a trip to England where I was exposed to the Globe Theatre in London and the life of a professional artist. I thought that art equals travel, collaboration and an interesting life.

What's the attraction of LA for a working composer?

I received a Fulbright Scholarship to do the scoring for motion pictures and television program at University of Southern California. The thing about LA for me is that creators from all over the world meet here. So most of my projects are for international independent cinema and not so American-focused. But I still have a really strong relationship with Australia.

You mention composers such as Peter Sculthorpe who arguably defined the "Australian sound". As

an Australian living in the US and looking in, what is that sound now?

I feel an Australian sound within me. It's the smells and what it feels like to be out in the bush, the crumpling of the leaves under your feet and the light as you fly over Sydney Harbour. There's something special about that, which you can hear and feel. I don't appreciate it as a foreigner, as it's still very much inside of me. I scored director Damien Powers's [2016 suspense-survival thriller] *Killing Ground*, which was very much tapping into that historical experience as well.

You've said that whenever you travel you take a sound recorder with you. What sounds have you captured?

When I was in Switzerland in the Alps I was up there recording bells and nature. I recorded through the Vatican in Rome, and storms along the Queensland coastline. I love to capture the sound around me as much as taking photos.

The Ground will have its world premiere as part of the concert *A Moment in Time*, June 19, Concert Hall, Queensland Performing Arts Centre, Brisbane.

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