

Graeme Koehne's Biography

Graeme Koehne
(b. 1956, Adelaide, South Australia)

Graeme Koehne is one of Australia's leading compositional figures, now gaining increasing attention internationally.

In Koehne's earliest compositions, from the late 1970s, the influence of Boulez is strong as it was, at that time, in the work of his teacher, Richard Meale. The Boulezian aesthetic did not exert its influence over Koehne for long however, as he searched to enrich his musical language beyond the parameters of the modernist style.

It was through his exploration of the work of Toru Takemitsu that Koehne initially grew to appreciate the vitality of the music of Debussy and Ravel. These influences are evident in *Rainforest*, which is classed among the major works of Australian music of the 1980s. This work for large orchestra brought Koehne's name to national (and subsequently international) attention, winning the prestigious Australian Composers Award at the 1982 Adelaide Festival, and ranking third overall at the Paris International Rostrum of Composers in 1983. *Rainforest* drew inspiration from the verdant tropical forests of north-eastern Australia, which impressed the composer during the period of his work at the regional University of New England in Armidale, New South Wales. The piece has received a large number of performances throughout Australia and in Europe, its conductors including Christoph Eschenbach, Louis Fremaux, Leif Segerstam and Ronald Zollman.

Rainforest also attracted the attention of Graeme Murphy, Australia's foremost choreographer. In 1983, he commissioned Koehne to compose the score for his Sydney Dance Company's new production based on Oscar Wilde's *The Selfish Giant* (subsequently made into an orchestral suite, the *Visions of Paradise*). The ballet's success led to a continuing association between Murphy and Koehne (*Limited Edition*, *Old Friends*, *New Friends*, *Nearly Beloved*, *Gallery* and *Tivoli*).

Around this time, Koehne also received commissions for a variety of works of more intimate scale, including the *Ricercare & Burlesca* for string trio (Reger String Trio), the *Capriccio* for piano and strings (Australian Chamber Orchestra) and the *Divertissement: Trois pieces bourgeoises* for string quartet (Australian String Quartet). His organ work, the *Gothic Toccata*, has become popular among organists in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States, and is the most recorded organ work by an Australian composer.

In these works, Koehne strives for a balance between the orchestral richness of *Rainforest* and his increasing desire to find a personal style of simplicity and eloquence. When the opportunity to advance his studies was provided by the award of a Harkness Fellowship in 1985, Koehne based himself at Yale University, which provided the opportunity to undertake private studies with Virgil Thomson. During his two years at Yale, Koehne also studied with Louis Andriessen and Jacob Druckman.

In Australia's Bicentennial year 1988, Koehne received prestigious commissions from the Australian Ballet (*Nocturnes* for the ballet *Gallery*), the Queensland Ballet (*Once Around the Sun*) and the Western Australian Ballet (*Rhythmic Birds of the Antipodes* for the ballet *Voyage Within*). The success of these works established Koehne's reputation as Australia's foremost composer for ballet.

Upon his return to Australia, Koehne succeeded Richard Meale as Lecturer in Composition at his alma mater, the University of Adelaide in South Australia. Koehne has found continued stimulation and fulfilment in the collaborative nature of working in theatre and in film. His chamber opera *Love Burns*, to a libretto by Louis Nowra, was a highlight of the 1992 Adelaide Festival of the Arts, and has subsequently been given new productions by the Lyric Opera of Queensland and Sydney's Belvoir Street Theatre (including performances at the 1998 Melbourne International Festival). *Love Burns* demonstrates the benefit of Koehne's studies with Thomson, one of the 20th century's masters of prosody and text setting. The skills and technique acquired in this area have also been displayed in Koehne's concert work for voice, notably the *Three Poems of Byron*.

Koehne has made several excursions into writing for film and television, usually in collaboration with colleague Michael Atkinson. The movie *Heaven's Burning* (an early vehicle for Russell Crowe), the television documentary *Giants of Time*, and an award-winning advertisement for the South Australian Tourism Commission designed for cinema screening, have been scored by this team.

Since his early experimentation with the avant garde, Koehne has progressed towards an approach grounded in the musical vernacular, aiming to draw classical music closer to the elements and highly varied styles of popular music. Influenced in particular by the "radical aesthetic conservatism" of the visual arts critic Peter Fuller, and by the "new classicism" movement in architecture, Koehne set out to broker an encounter between the techniques of classical music and popular music. His music aims to reinvigorate traditional compositional methods and techniques through their re-engagement with musical vernacular and the diverse forms of popular culture.

The orchestral concert-opener *Unchained Melody* (1991), in giving expression to the composer's own feeling of hard-won liberation from the constraints of modernist thinking, draws upon the rhythmic and melodic materials of contemporary popular music. Its companion piece *Powerhouse* (1993) is a *perpetuum mobile* built on a rumba as its rhythmic base. The work celebrates the music of Carl Stalling and Raymond Scott, creators of the soundtracks for the famous 1940s and 50s Warner Brothers cartoons. The third work in this trilogy, *Elevator Music* (1997) was commissioned by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra and was premiered by the orchestra under Chief Conductor Edo de Waart. *Elevator Music* takes its cue from the much-maligned (and in Koehne's view, under-appreciated) work of the postwar popular orchestral composer-arrangers who have been classed as mere background music providers, such as Les Baxter, Nelson Riddle, Henry Mancini and John Barry. All three pieces have become popular choices for orchestral concerts, recordings and tours. They have been incorporated into ballets, television documentaries and versions have even been made for US marching bands, most notably the spectacular performances of the "Concord Blue Devils".

The interest in byways of popular culture and their interaction with "classical" modes is also demonstrated in smaller-scale works such as *Nashville Tuning* (in versions for guitar quartet, premiered by Guitar Trek, and for two pianos, premiered by Nurit Tilles and Edmund Niemann).

In 1998, Koehne became the first composer commissioned by the Australian Ballet to write a full evening work. The ballet *1914* is based upon the novel "Fly Away Peter" by David Malouf, with choreography by Stephen Baynes. Following its premiere at the Sydney Opera House, the production subsequently toured to Melbourne, Adelaide and Canberra and was recorded by Orchestra Victoria for ABC Classics.

The following year, the Sydney Symphony Orchestra commissioned Koehne to write a concerto for the orchestra's principal oboist, Diana Doherty. The resulting work, *Inflight Entertainment*, employing amplified oboe, is of symphonic dimensions and has made an extraordinary impact in its numerous performances throughout Australia. The work is featured on the Naxos CD of Graeme Koehne's music released in 2005 with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra conducted by Takuo Yuasa.

Following the work's success, The Sydney Symphony commissioned Koehne to write a concerto for Australian jazz trumpet master James Morrison. *High Art* (2003), exploits the features of Morrison's extraordinary technique. One of the early performances of the concerto brought Koehne into contact with conductor Kristjan Järvi, who has subsequently directed performances of the concerto with Morrison - both with symphony orchestras and in a special reduced version for the Absolute Ensemble - in Europe and the United States.

As the company's major work for the 2001 Australian Centenary of Federation, the Sydney Dance Company commissioned Koehne to compose a score for the ballet *Tivoli*, which traces the history of the popular entertainments of 20th century Australia. *Tivoli* toured throughout Australia, and Koehne has prepared an orchestral suite from this score which will be premiered by the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra in 2006.

2006 will also see the premiere by the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra of two new works: a double cello concerto commissioned by the cellist twins Pei-Jee and Pei-Sian Ng, and a "prelude and aria" for soprano and orchestra based on Nevil Shute's iconic novel of the end of the world, *On the Beach*.

Graeme Koehne has served on several occasions on the Australia Council, the Australian Government's arts funding advisory body, and since 2002 has been Chair of the Australia Council Music Board and a member of the Australia Council. He has served in various advisory capacities for the South Australian Government, and in 1998-99 was South Australia's Composer-in-Residence. He was awarded a Doctorate of Music from the University of Adelaide in 2002 and in 2004 received the Sir Bernard Heinze Award from the University of Melbourne.

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