

Driving over both sealed and unpredictable dirt roads, some of the closest communities to Ngukurr are still two hours away. When a car isn't available, walking is the only way. Daniel and his artistic collaborators make frequent cultural visits to Numbulwar, a community where he was born and raised, which is more than a four-hour drive.

"We have to get a lift there. You have to stay for maybe two or three days, and then you're going to ask around, 'Take me back, I'll fill up your fuel.' Sometimes, I have to walk and tell them at home, 'Let's go, we have to do ceremony smoking.' And then we get together and walk to the house to smoke the house. I have to walk and let them know that maybe we'll be there in the afternoon. That's what I do; that's why I come and ask for this."

Despite the challenge, Daniel is a great motivator within his community. A charismatic and incredibly hard worker, who knows the deep importance of his work, he rallies those around him to overcome the tyranny of distance with incredible results, invigorating communities where young children are excited at hearing and learning these songs.

"Through the songline, through the *manikay*, we are brothers and sisters," says Daniel.

"No matter what, you're standing on the stage, or you're standing in the bush, it doesn't matter, you're one. We need to share this."

*Hand to Earth* will perform at Forum Upstairs on 7 June as part of Melbourne's RISING festival, and at Carriageworks on 11 June as part of the Soft Centre Festival for VIVID Sydney. Donations to *Hand to Earth's* culture car fund can be made at [australianculturalfund.org.au](http://australianculturalfund.org.au).



Daniel Wilfred and Sunny Kim performing for *Hand to Earth*. Photo supplied

## CUTTING EDGE

### Music, mathematics and healing

Avant-garde multi-instrumentalist Benjamin Skepper explains his desire to include science and technology in his art practice.

I consider the rich history of music, not only through the Western classical canon in which I am theoretically trained, but as a reflection of all the world's cultures, with a deep knowing that all music possesses an inherent power to transform our human experience.

Over four decades as a musician, composer and performer, I've worked and travelled extensively across Australia and abroad, deeply aware of the role music and art play in facilitating tangible social change, inclusion and healing.

I grew up in Naarm/Melbourne, deeply embedded within my diverse linguistic and cultural background. My Australian-Japanese heritage has very much influenced my love for many different forms of art and music, from First Nations, local and diaspora artists. This curiosity led me to travel the world to immerse myself in the sounds of other cultures, as I branched away from two decades in the classical music system and set out on a path of self-discovery and independent practice as a self-sustaining conceptual artist.

While recognised as an avant-garde cellist, I am a multi-instrumentalist, having performed concertos on the piano and harpsichord. An avid proponent of the electro-acoustic genre, I enjoy free improvisation and exploring non-classical structures. Operating at the intersection of the analog-digital divide for the last two decades, I have harnessed my classical instruments, seeking to expand the boundaries of how they may be considered as sonic devices, and beyond their traditional conception. I am deeply fascinated by technology and how these innovations can be applied within the context of my own arts practice. The desire to balance technology with human processes (the making and playing) drives my creative output.

In 2007, I left Naarm for Tokyo, and after a year working as an international lawyer, founded my studio "contrapuntal". Through this creative enterprise, I've been commissioned to produce and create performances, site-specific installations and audiovisual artworks for an array of clients around the world, constantly seeking to build new audiences for my work, and most importantly situate myself within creative communities who share similar visions for the future. From my base in Japan, I worked extensively throughout Europe and Russia – though performing for thousands of farmers and shamans in the desert lands of Kazakhstan remains a career standout.

On the topic of the connective and healing power of music, I've always been fascinated by geometry and the relationship between music and mathematics. Born with perfect pitch, as a child I became aware of the anomaly within the Pythagorean algorithm which has defined Western musical tuning systems for millennia (a fact I came to know when tuning the harpsichord as an eight-year-old). My interest in tuning temperaments, symmetry and physics led to my appointment as Australia's first Research Fellow at the Moscow State Conservatory, in the groundbreaking field of music and genetics. Genetic music is a revolutionary new system of music derived from the molecular structure of human DNA (a topic for another article, though research findings were recently published by MIT, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 2020).

Last year, I relocated my studio practice and "contrapuntal" back home. I believe Australia is in an exciting period of cultural transformation, and as we enter this new cycle, I am keen to contribute to a more creatively robust, socially just, culturally safe and truly inclusive landscape for all artists working towards positive social change and sustainability within the arts. My studio remains committed to research-driven experimentation, multidisciplinary collaboration and harnessing novel technologies and innovations in the sciences, to engage and expose audiences to new and exciting ideas.

After a sold-out performance at Melbourne Recital Centre in February, I am very excited to be performing new works at Phoenix Central Park in Sydney this month. I also applaud the Neilson family for its significant cultural contribution, as Australia needs more high-spec, well-resourced performance spaces, equally open to platforming new and experimental forms of creative expression. So, I am taking this opportunity to compose for piano and electronics, as I continue my work with the cello, field recordings, soundscape composition and exploring the human body as a musical instrument (my heartbeat recordings). I think my sounds will resonate beautifully with the stunning architecture of Phoenix, and within the bodies of the audiences lucky enough to gain free entry to the venue via its novel lottery system.

In collaboration with Phoenix, we will also be shooting a new music video in situ, featuring the piano; a reflection on a new creative direction in my career which I cannot wait to share with audiences. These works will touch on modern classical, cinematic, ambient, electronic and natural landscapes, expressing my love for the piano, which I started playing when I was just two years old. I thank my mother, Jeanette Igawa Brown, who worked multiple jobs to acquire the late-1800s Berlin-made Schwechten upright, on which I am currently writing these new songs. There is something otherworldly about playing century-old, hand-made instruments, and this piano is imbued with a deep spiritual significance.

*Benjamin Skepper performs at Phoenix Central Park in Sydney on 15 June.*

## DANCE

## My Brilliant Ballet

Cathy Marston discusses her new dance work, adapted from Miles Franklin's classic novel.

by Jo Litson

*Jane Eyre, Wuthering Heights, Lady Chatterley's Lover, Etham Frome and Of Mice and Men.* Not only are they classic novels, they have all been adapted into ballets by award-winning British choreographer Cathy Marston.

Now, she is creating a new work for Queensland Ballet, based on Miles Franklin's classic Australian novel *My Brilliant Career*.

"My parents were both English teachers and I grew up reading lots of books and going to see plays, musicals and so on, not only dance. I loved the storytelling aspect of theatre. For me, dance has always made sense if there is a 'meaning' or 'intention' behind the movements," Marston tells *Limelight*.

"When I was a child doing RAD [Royal Academy of Dance] exams, I would write down my own mini-stories for each exercise, but now I love drawing on works of literature, as well as biographies and myths to create works. I love the emotion that is held in movement, and while it's possible to create emotional abstract dances, I enjoy the specificity of stories about particular characters, emotions and relationships. For me, making a dance about 'love' or 'jealousy' or 'loneliness' or 'passion' is too broad. I want to know the details! Precisely what sort of 'love' is it? Between whom? How did it start? What does it feel like? And so on."

Marston spent two years at The Royal Ballet School, then danced in Switzerland with ballet companies in Zürich, Lucerne and Bern. Returning to London to focus on choreography, she worked as an Associate Artist at the Royal Opera House for five years until 2007, during which time she created her first full-length work based on Ibsen's play *Ghosts*.

In 2007, she returned to the Bern Ballett as Artistic Director, where she remained until 2013. She has since worked as a freelance choreographer, creating works for companies including San Francisco Ballet, American Ballet Theatre and The Royal Danish Ballet.

In 2020, she choreographed a piece for The Royal Ballet called *The Cellist*. Inspired by Jacqueline du Pré, the three principal roles were the titular cellist, her husband Daniel Barenboim and her cello.

In August this year, she succeeds Christian Spuck as the Artistic Director of Ballett Zürich.

Asked when she knew she wanted to become a choreographer, she says, "I think I was always choreographing, but I learned what the word really means when I joined The Royal Ballet School at the age of 16. From that point on, I knew that my real goal was to choreograph."

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Please recycle this magazine

*This month's cover image features Frances Rings and Russell Page in Bangarra Dance Theatre's 2002 production of Walkabout. Photo © James Houston. This photograph is used with the permission of Bangarra Dance Theatre and the Page family.*



## Steve Dow

Steve Dow is the 2020 Walkley Arts Journalism Award recipient for his essay, profile and reportage portfolio. The Melbourne-born, Sydney-based arts writer's work also appears in *The Saturday Paper*, *Guardian Australia*, *The Monthly*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Age*, *Meanjin*, *Art Guide Australia* and *VAULT*.



## Nicholas Routley

Nicholas Routley retired from a lectureship at the University of Sydney in 2007. He was the founding Director of the Sydney Chamber Choir for 30 years, commissioning and performing many Australian compositions. He is now active in the Northern Rivers, NSW as a pianist, composer and conductor.



## Miriam Cosic

Miriam Cosic is a Sydney-based journalist and author. A former Arts Editor then Literary Editor at *The Australian*, she also has qualifications in music and made her original transition to arts journalism through writing on classical music.



## Breandáin O'Shea

Musician, writer and podcaster Breandáin O'Shea lives in Berlin, where he writes for various international media, including Deutsche Welle (DW), the BBC and ABC. He also produces *Tall Poppies: The Podcast* and lectures. His accolades include a Gold Medal from the New York Festivals.



## Christopher Lawrence

Christopher Lawrence is a writer, broadcaster and board member of Van Diemen's Band and the Sydney Youth Orchestras. He has presented on ABC radio and TV, and his books are available in Australia, the UK, US, Hungary and China.



## Benjamin Skepper

Multi-instrumentalist, composer and cultural producer, Benjamin Skepper operates at the confluence of art, science, technology, fashion, contemporary classical and the avant-garde. A respected multidisciplinary artist and collaborator, his work has taken him across musical borders and artistic boundaries for which he has garnered international acclaim.



## Diana Simmonds

Diana Simmonds is an author, editor and theatre critic. She is also a regular book reviewer for *Limelight*. Her arts website *Stage Noise* is Sydney's longest established. She has written for Fairfax, News Ltd and Kerry Packer, and at 15 was *The Mombasa Times'* yachting correspondent.