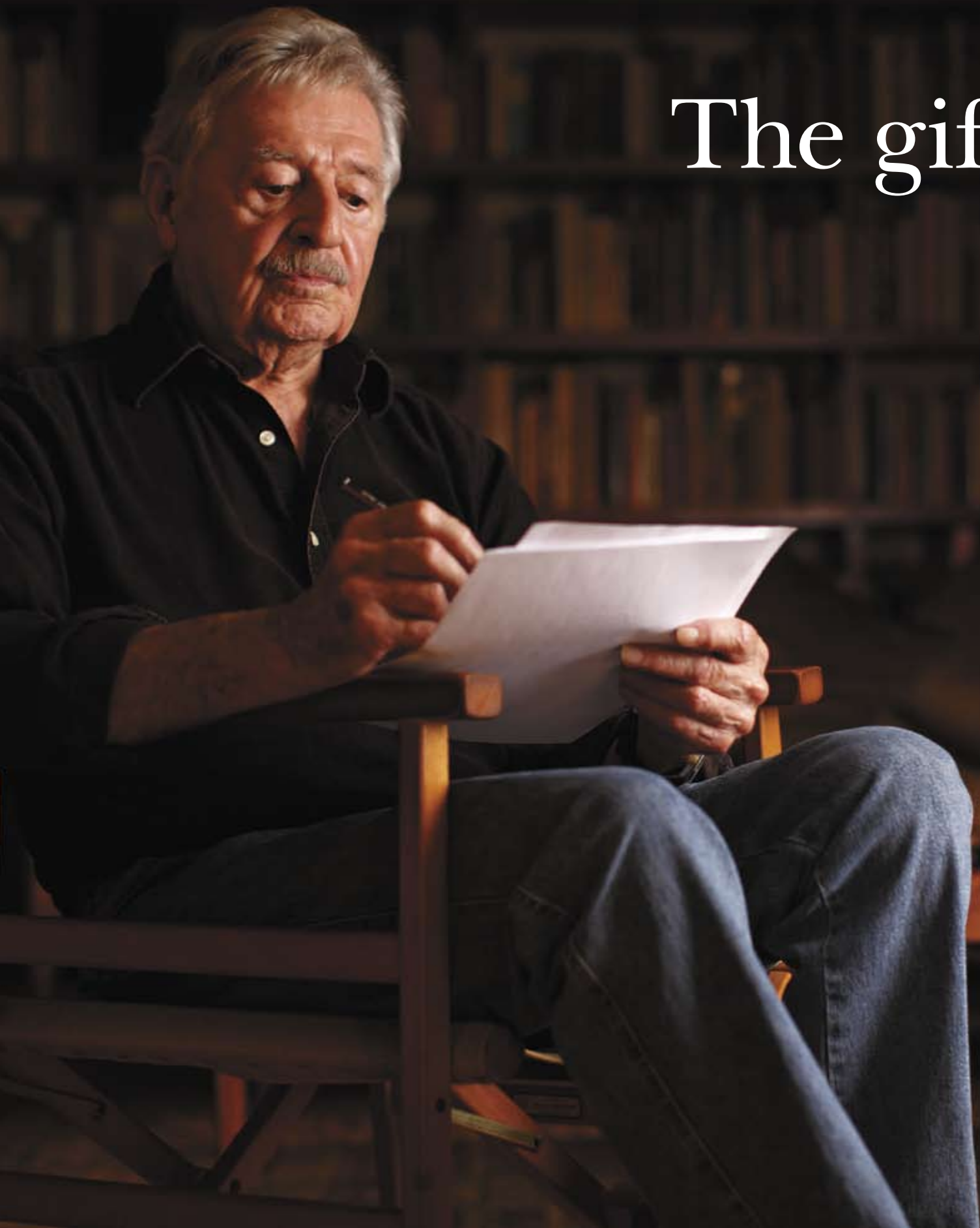


# The gift



# of music

As a composer Peter Sculthorpe's contribution is immense.

As a presence in teaching and performance at the University it is profound, writes **Caroline Baum**

## cover story

At 80, Peter Sculthorpe is not resting on his laurels. If anything, the composer is busier than ever, with new commissions and a diary full of celebratory events to attend all over the country: There's lunch with the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra; a concert of *Small Town* with the Australia Ensemble in Thirroul; a festival performance in Kangaroo Valley, another occasion in Canberra. The pace is relentless and would tire someone half his age. But Sculthorpe has always been an intensely social animal, happily mixing work and pleasure rather than squirreling himself away to compose.

If further proof were needed that Sculthorpe is not about to slow down, one need look no further than his Woollahra driveway where his shiny red MG is being polished as we speak, ready for its next outing. Hardly the car of a pensioner. He's had four of the British roadsters since the 1960s. "I love the way they make you feel in touch with the road, and I used to find driving a great form of relaxation," says Sculthorpe.

He is wearing a waistcoat but has abandoned his once trademark foulard knotted at the neck. "I think it would seem affected these days," he says. But Sculthorpe has always been an aesthete. His home is filled with light, immaculate and elegant: low wooden tables, Asian ceramics, and in his studio, a rather good portrait by his long time assistant, Adrienne Levenson, who has caught the softness of his eyes and his slight shyness.

Reading his autobiography, *Sun Music*, published in 1965, it's hard not to be struck by how blessed a life Sculthorpe has had. He's had many opportunities and supporters, been extremely successful, recognised in his own lifetime both at home and abroad and collaborated with some of the greatest musicians in the world.

He was blessed with a great talent, but also with being born at the right time, when Australia was eager to develop its own cultural identity. He received encouragement along the way from enlightened mentors. His curiosity led him to make early forays into indigenous culture before political correctness decreed that white men weren't welcome and his charm cemented enduring friendships and collaborations. His music was used as the soundtrack for the best years of Australian cinema, adding another dimension to his repertoire.

In recognition of his great good fortune, it is typical that he should wish to spread it around and extend it to future generations with a bequest which made national headlines when it was announced that he would leave his \$3.5 million estate to Sydney University's Conservatorium and Department of Music to endow the first Chair of Australian music. There was a collective gasp at his generosity, though no one who knows him would have been surprised.

"It's a department that has struggled a bit," he says, diplomatically playing down some of the more turbulent episodes in its history. "The way the bequest is worded gives equal weight to teaching and to performance."

Talking about it today, Sculthorpe is keen to emphasise that the gift only becomes active after his death and that he intends to stick around for a good while yet. A few years

Photos by Ted Sealey



ago he stared down a bout of clinical depression which he talked about publicly to help other sufferers. He admits to no vices or addictions. “I am not a gourmand, I eat simply, no sugar or salt, but I do like a little scotch,” he says with a smile. And no regrets, either. “Of course I have wished some of my pieces were better, but then sometimes I go back and revise them.”

And on a more personal note? He thinks hard. “I suppose I’ve missed out on being married, but it’s not a great regret. I never wanted children,” he says, adding that he enjoys being an uncle and that his nephew is about to come and stay. “I love other people’s children, pets, log fires and swimming pools,” he jokes. He has no time for high maintenance things.

Peter Sculthorpe first joined Sydney University in 1961, having failed to complete his thesis at Oxford. “My father had died and I only wanted the doctorate for him,” he says candidly. At the invitation of his mentor Donald Peart, he joined the Music Department in 1963, aged 34, and taught composition there until 1999. He became an Emeritus Professor in 2005. “Donald had the ability to attract exciting students,” Sculthorpe recalls, mentioning Ann Boyd, Barry Conyngham and Ross Edwards. “But he was a stickler when it came to dress code. We all had to wear jackets and ties when we lectured,” he chuckles.

By his own admission, Sculthorpe was a novice at teaching. “I was only one lecture ahead of my students. I once had to teach a 13-week course on jazz at one day’s notice!” It was, he says, a heady, pioneering time. “Neither composition nor ethnomusicology had been taught at that point. Previously the way you studied music was to do exercises where you wrote in the style of Palestrina or Bach.

“In those days, our first composition students had a very hazy belief in Australian composition. I had to teach serial twelve-tone music, and I found that pretty alien but when I realised how outraged other universities were that such music was being taught at all, it made me perversely more interested. And the students had heard of it and were curious.”

To their amazement, he urged them to take interest in the world beyond music. “I would ask them who won the cricket, who won the tennis, questions that had nothing to do with music, and I introduced them to works by Patrick White, Russell Drysdale and Sidney Nolan, and we’d discuss the war in Vietnam and the phenomenon that was *Hair*.”

In ethnomusicology, there was more groundbreaking work to be done. “There were no books, no recordings. We could not perform works on the didgeridoo because there were no performers,” says Sculthorpe, delighted by his collaborations with William Barton, which began in 2001 and have resulted in several recordings.

At this point in the conversation, it becomes obvious that Sculthorpe is uncomfortable dwelling on the past. “I’ve done it too much,” he says, apologetically. These days, he prefers to focus on the present and the future, about which he is gravely concerned. “My current passion is climate change and I want to tackle it,” he says. “I first became aware of the issue in England in the 1970s. My mum came to stay with me while I was teaching at Sussex University. She’d go to some of the first meetings being held by the Greens and come back saying ‘cars will have to go.’”

He has installed solar hot water at home. A rainwater tank and photovoltaic roof panels are next. “I want to be a role model,” he says. “We are going to have

*I love other people’s children, pets, log fires and swimming pools*

to fight to retain our paradise,” he continues, talking about his sadness over the devastation of the Coorong (“it breaks my heart”), his love for the Top End, and wondering how it is that he has managed not to visit the Kimberley yet. He remains an optimist (“I have to be”) but admits that he is less of one than he was. “That is why Patrick White and I fell out, I think,” he says. “When we worked together on an opera libretto – which became *Eliza Fraser Sings* – he wanted to look down, whereas I always want to look up. He disliked himself so much, he expected too much of himself. I, on the other hand, had no expectations, I just wanted to write better music.” White is on Sculthorpe’s mind this year because he is setting some of his unpublished poems to music for the National Film and Sound Archive.

There is also a piano work and two string quartets in the pipeline. With all his commissions now, Sculthorpe’s priority is “to write music that is a call to arms, to spread the message about the fragility of the environment and the urgency of the issue.” He does not appear to be unduly concerned at the heavy workload. “I’m fast, I can work day and night,” he says. “In fact I work well into the late hours when it’s quiet and the phone doesn’t ring.”

Which it has, regularly, throughout our conversation. Acknowledging that his diary is rather full, he says “In other years I like to give myself a party for my birthday, but this year other people are giving parties for me all year!” **SAM**

### Essential Sculthorpe: an introduction to some of the composer’s best loved works

*Irkanda I*: the violin solo follows the contours of the hills around Canberra.

*Sun Music III*: Sculthorpe’s first piece to explore his interest in Asian music, quoting from Balinese sounds.

*Port Essington*: pits a string orchestra (representing the bush) against a string trio (representing European settlement) and uses an Aboriginal melody.

*Mangrove, Kakadu, Earth Cry*: powerful orchestral works inspired by landscape and its wildlife.

*Small Town*: dedicated to his friend, the painter Russell Drysdale and recorded with Sculthorpe as speaker.

*Nourlangie*: concerto for guitar, strings and percussion written for John Williams, inspired by the Top End landscape.