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FEATURES

Australian Women in Composition



Leah Blankendaal

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Professional development programs such as these are important for addressing the representation of women at elite levels of art music composition. Another way this discrepancy may be addressed is by giving young composers – men and women – access to the wealth of strong female role models who are currently working within the industry. With this in mind, here are four remarkable women making waves in Australian art music, offering their advice to those about to embark on the composition pathway.

Alice Humphries

Alice graduated from the West Australian Academy of Performing Arts with a Bachelor of Performing Arts (Honours) in Jazz Competition in 2008. She has recently submitted her Masters in Composition at the University of Melbourne. Recently she's been working on learning electronics through music. "Working on scores has been great, but I do miss the immediate creative satisfaction of jazz," she says.

In offering advice to young composers, she has a clear message. "Just keep writing!" says Alice. "And finish things. For instance, just the thought of putting together my own band and doing a gig was terrifying, because you continually have that thought that says 'I'm not good enough'. You're never going to be ready, you're never going to be good enough...if you're waiting for this moment where you decide 'now I'm ready to put on a gig, to apply for that grant, to do that program' the moment will actually never come. You've got to just do it anyway."

Katy Abbott

Katy a prolific and accomplished composer. She lectures in composition at the

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University of Melbourne and has had works performed by Halcyon, The Song Company, The Adelaide Symphony Orchestra and The Melbourne Symphony Orchestra. Her body of work includes orchestral, chamber and vocal music. In offering advice to young composers, Katy says the same thing. "Be reliable. Plug away. Don't rush (your music or your career), take and make opportunities – there are some incredible professional development programs currently out there." She is particularly passionate about finding an audience for new music.

"I can almost draw a timeline tracking how my commissions / opportunities have emerged through connections around the piece I have been currently working on," she says. "For example, I was working with Adelaide Symphony Orchestra in 2009 when Mark Gaydon, who is Principal bassoon, asked me to write a solo bassoon work which ended as an amazingly fruitful collaboration...For me this demonstrates the power of connections. I make a point about being easy to work with and spending time making sure the music is right ready for rehearsal."

Jessica Wells

Jessica is a Sydney based composer and arranger. She was recently involved in the Victorian Opera's Seven Deadly Sins, a composers' development project, run in collaboration with cabaret singer Meow Meow, Orchestra Victoria, Symphony Australia and the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra. She also runs Jigsaw music; an orchestration and arrangement business that works with film companies to score prepare film scores.

Jessica stresses the importance of having high quality work samples and a portfolio that represents what you can do. "I get maybe two or three emails a month from people asking to work for me and it's hard, because there are a lot of talented people out there and you can't hire everyone," she says. "One mistake I see regularly is poor work samples...simple things like formatting in [notation software] Sibelius. At the end of the day, you need to stand out, so it's about the quality of your work. You've got to compete and you've got to strive reach those high levels."

Anisha Thomas

Anisha graduated from Sydney University in 2014 with a Bachelor of Music (Hons) in Composition. She completed her Honours study with Sandy Evans, during which time she explored the confluence of Hindustani and Western art music traditions. Recently she collaborated with a South Indian dancer on her piece Nayika, which explored the cultural expectations of a woman in marriage. Anisha stresses the importance for young composers to make their own musical opportunities. "The learning never stops – you've got to keep persevering," she says. "There's this amazing visual metaphor of an iceberg that relates to success, where under the surface there is this process of hard work, failure, sacrifice, more failure, hard work, progress etc. Then you come to the tip, the bit that's visible above the surface, and that's success."

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