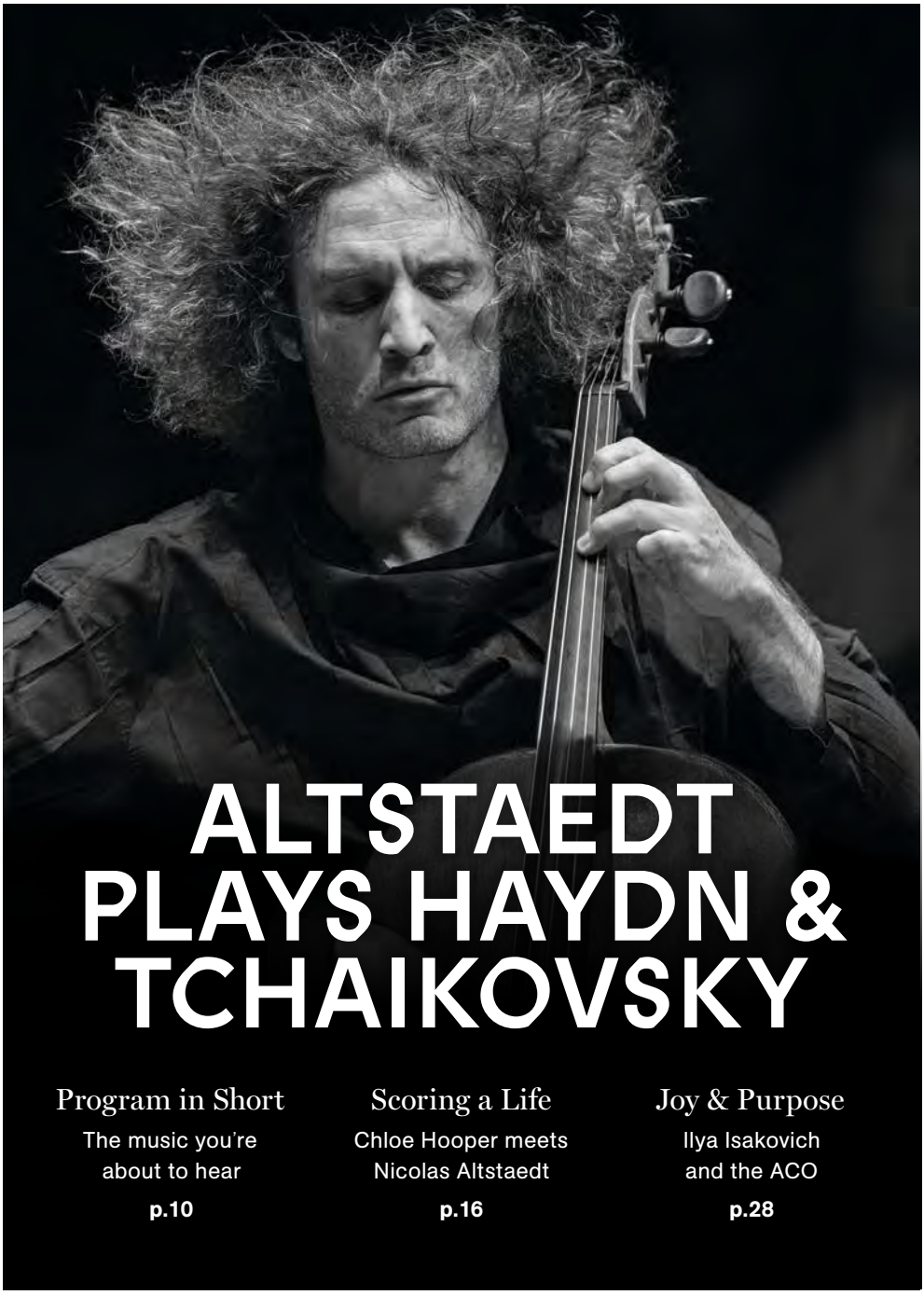
Australian Chamber Orchestra

RICHARD TOGNETTI – ARTISTIC DIRECTOR



ALTSTAEDT PLAYS HAYDN & TCHAIKOVSKY

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aco

THE AUSTRALIAN CHAMBER ORCHESTRA IN COLLABORATION WITH SYDNEY DANCE COMPANY PRESENTS

SILENCE & RAPTURE

JS BACH & ARVO PÄRT

A SPIRITUAL AWAKENING

Australian Chamber Orchestra

Directed by Richard Tognetti
Choreography by Rafael Bonachela
Featuring countertenor Iestyn Davies
and artists from Sydney Dance Company

2–19 AUGUST
Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide,
Perth, Canberra and Brisbane.

TICKETS FROM $59* | $35* FOR U35S *Transaction fee of $8.50 applies

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Inside you'll find features and interviews that shine a spotlight on our players and the music you are about to hear. Enjoy the read.

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Violinist Ilya Isakovich on 20 years with the ACO

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Cover: Nicolas Altstaedt. Printed by Special T Print.

WELCOME

I welcome the brilliant German-French cellist Nicolas Altstaedt, who has returned to Australia to perform with the Australian Chamber Orchestra for the first time. Nicolas is a musician of dazzling virtuosity, whose infectious charisma and dynamism makes him a natural fit with the ACO. He joins the Orchestra not just as a soloist, but as guest director, to lead the ACO through an eclectic program that moves from the music of 20th-century composers György Kurtág and Iannis Xenakis to Tchaikovsky's *Rococo Variations* and Haydn's beloved Cello Concerto in C major.

In this program, we also celebrate the milestone anniversary of much-loved ACO violinist Ilya Isakovich, who joined the Orchestra 20 years ago this year. Ilya spoke with writer Fiona Wright about his extraordinary journey, from learning the violin as a child in Ukraine, to giving his audition in Italy, and how he came to the decision to start a new life in Australia with the ACO.

Following this tour, we begin preparations for *Silence & Rapture*, our much-anticipated collaboration with Rafael Bonachela and Sydney Dance Company that celebrates the spiritually-infused music of JS Bach and Arvo Pärt. It promises to be an extraordinarily moving event; I look forward to seeing you there.

Richard Evans AM
Managing Director

Join the conversation
#ACO24Season |
@AustralianChamberOrchestra

News

2024 Annual Appeal

Philanthropic support helps us continue crossing centuries, borders and boundaries to bring our music to our ACO family: old and new, near and far, young and old. Help us bring the music by making a tax-deductible donation before 30 June at **aco.com.au/donate**.

ACO Pier 2/3

ACO Up Close: Nicolas Altstaedt Solo

28 JUNE

ACO Pier 2/3, Sydney

Experience a one-off recital from the sensational cellist, as he performs a program featuring Bach's Cello Suite No.5 and Kodály's Sonata for Solo Cello in B minor, in the flawless acoustics of our custom-built concert hall, The Neilson.

ACO Families: How To Catch A Star

6–11 JULY

ACO Pier 2/3, Sydney

"Once there was a boy and the boy loved stars very much..."

Don't miss the return season of our enchanting ACO Families production of Oliver Jeffers' bestselling children's book, brought to life onstage by the musicians of the ACO.

ACO Up Close: Omar Musa & Mariel Roberts

2 AUGUST

ACO Pier 2/3, Sydney

Award-winning hip-hop artist Omar Musa brings his enthralling music, poetry and theatre performance, *The Offering*, to ACO Pier 2/3 in collaboration with cellist Mariel Roberts.

National Tours

Silence & Rapture

2–19 AUGUST

National Tour

A spectacular showcase of dance, music, vocals and lighting, *Silence & Rapture* is a mesmerising collaboration with **Sydney Dance Company** centred around the otherwordly music of JS Bach and Arvo Pärt.

Tognetti. Mendelssohn. Bach.

5–23 SEPTEMBER

National Tour

Sparks fly and melodies soar when Richard Tognetti directs music close to the ACO's heart, including a performance of Mendelssohn's beloved Octet.

Scotland Unbound

7–20 NOVEMBER

National Tour

Guitarist Sean Shibe makes his Australian debut in this inspired and thrilling season closer, directed by Richard Tognetti.

Support the ACO

There is nothing like the shared experience of music. Donate today to help us continue sharing the beauty and wonder of music with our ACO family: old and new, near and far, young and old.

Music brings us together. Help us bring the music.

Support the ACO with a tax-deductible donation.
Call 02 8274 3803 or visit aco.com.au/donate

PROGRAM

The Australian Chamber Orchestra acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country, on whose unceded land we perform today. We pay our respects to Elders past and present.

Nicolas Altstaedt Director and Cello
Australian Chamber Orchestra

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The concert will last approximately one hour and 40 minutes, including a 20-minute interval.
The Australian Chamber Orchestra reserves the right to alter scheduled artists and programs as necessary.

ACO concerts are regularly broadcast on ABC Classic.
Altstaedt Plays Haydn & Tchaikovsky will be broadcast on Friday 12 July, 1pm and available on demand for 30 days after.

MUSICIANS

The musicians on stage for this performance.

Discover more

Learn more about our musicians, go behind the scenes and listen to playlists at:
aco.com.au

Nicolas Altstaedt
Director and Cello

Nicolas plays a 1749 Giovanni Battista Guadagnini cello.

Helena Rathbone
Principal Violin

Helena plays the 1732 'ex-Dollfus' Stradivarius violin kindly on loan from anonymous Australian private benefactors. Her Chair is sponsored by Margaret Gibbs & Rodney Cameron.

Anna da Silva Chen
Violin

Anna plays an 18th-century violin made in the style of Pietro Guarneri of Venice, kindly on loan from Jannie Brown.

Aiko Goto
Violin

Aiko plays her own French violin by Jean-Baptiste Vuillaume. Her Chair is sponsored by Anthony & Sharon Lee Foundation.

Ilya Isakovich
Violin

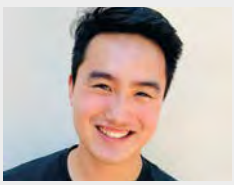
Ilya plays a 1590 Brothers Amati violin kindly on loan from the ACO Instrument Fund. His Chair is sponsored by Meg Meldrum.

Liisa Pallandi
Violin

Liisa plays a 1759 Giovanni Battista Guadagnini violin kindly on loan from the ACO. Her Chair is sponsored by the Melbourne Medical Syndicate.

Thibaud Pavlovic-Hobba
Violin

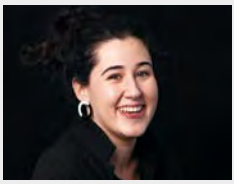
Thibaud plays a 1756 Giovanni Battista Gabrielli violin kindly on loan from Helena Rathbone.



Tim Yu
Violin

Tim plays an 1800 violin by Raffaele & Antonio Gagliano. His Chair is sponsored by Barbara & Ralph Ward-Ambler.

 Photography by Andrew Quilty, Daniel Boud, Georges Antoni, Ben Sullivan, Stephen Ward, and Keith Saunders.



Doretta Balkizas
Violin

Doretta plays a violin by Nicolas Vuillaume. She appears courtesy of the University of Queensland.

Zoë Black
Violin

Zoë plays an 1800 violin by Emidio Celani. She appears courtesy of Australian National Academy of Music (ANAM).

Mark Ingwersen
Violin

Mark plays a 1989 violin by David Gussett.

Stefanie Farrands
Principal Viola

Stefanie plays her own 2016 viola made by Ragnar Hayn in Berlin. Her Chair is sponsored by peckvonhartel architects.

Elizabeth Woolnough
Viola

Elizabeth plays her own 1968 Parisian viola by Pierre M. Audinot. Her Chair is sponsored by Terry Campbell AO & Christine Campbell.

Justin Williams
Viola

Justin plays a viola by an unknown maker, likely made in the Tyrol region in the late 18th century. He appears courtesy of Sydney Symphony Orchestra.

Melissa Barnard
Cello

Melissa plays a cello by Jean-Baptiste Vuillaume made in 1846. Her Chair is sponsored by Jason & Alexandra Wenderoth.

Julian Thompson
Cello

Julian plays a 1729 Giuseppe Guarneri filius Andreæ cello with elements of the instrument crafted by his son, Giuseppe Guarneri del Gesù, kindly donated to the ACO by the late Peter Weiss AO. His Chair is sponsored by the Grist & Stewart Families.

Maxime Bibeau
Principal Bass

Max plays a late-16th-century Gasparo da Salò bass kindly on loan from a private Australian benefactor. His Chair is sponsored by Darin Cooper Foundation.

Guest Musicians

The cello has been revered as a subject of beauty, emotion and virtuosity by artists for centuries. In this program we feature pieces by artists from Cornelis Schut to Egon Schiele who have celebrated the instrument in their work.

Still Life 1662–1681, by Johann Friedrich Grueber (c.1620–1681). Rijksmuseum.

PROGRAM IN SHORT

Your five-minute read before lights down.

Pre-concert talks take place 45 minutes before the start of every concert. See the ACO information desk for location details.

Llewellyn Hall
Bernard Rofe
Fri 14 June, 7.15pm

QPAC Concert Hall
Matthew Hodge
Mon 17 June, 6.15pm

City Recital Hall
Jack Stephens
Tue 18 June, 7.15pm
Thu 20 June, 6.15pm
Sat 29 June, 6.15pm

Newcastle City Hall
Bernard Rofe
Fri 21 June, 6.45pm

Arts Centre Melbourne
Andrew Aronowicz
Sun 23 June, 1.45pm
Mon 24 June, 6.45pm

Adelaide Town Hall
Russell Torrance
Tue 25 June, 6.45pm

Perth Concert Hall
Will Yeoman
Wed 26 June, 6.45pm

Sydney Opera House
Jack Stephens
Sun 30 June, 1.15pm

Pre-concert speakers are subject to change.

Joseph Haydn

(1732–1809)

The Seven Last Words of Christ: I. Introduzione, IX. Il terremoto

The Seven Last Words of Our Saviour on the Cross was commissioned for the 1786 Good Friday service at Spain's Oratorio de la Santa Cueva. The work consists of seven slow movements for orchestra, labelled "sonatas", each representing Christ's seven last sayings on the cross. These are framed by a slow *Introduction* and terrifying *Earthquake* conclusion to mark the point of Christ's death. Haydn found the assignment extremely difficult, writing that "it was no easy task to compose seven adagios lasting ten minutes each, and to succeed one another without fatiguing the listeners". However he overcame these difficulties, and the work came to be performed far and wide in Paris, Rome, Berlin and Vienna. In 1787 Haydn adapted the work for string quartet, which is the version most often heard today. In these performances we present a hybrid that draws on both Haydn's quartet and orchestral versions.

György Kurtág

(1926–)

Officium breve, inmemoriam Andræ Szervánszky, Op.28: Selections

György Kurtág is best known as a composer of supercharged miniatures and blistering, bite-sized experiments, with individual movements lasting no more than a few minutes in his search for musical truth. His *Officium breve* was composed in memory of the Hungarian composer Andræ Szervánszky. One of Szervánszky's late influences was the music of Anton Webern, another composer of meticulously wrought musical miniatures, and Kurtág's *Officium breve* contains several quotations of Webern's music. Of the three movements presented in these concerts, the first two are short, sharp musical statements: the first is a series of expressive cluster chords, the second is a series of frantic overlapping textures separated by sudden pauses. In total contrast, the third is a serene arioso in memory of Szervánszky.

Painting of Joesph Haydn, 1791, by Thomas Hardy. György Kurtág, 2014, by Lenke Szilágyi.

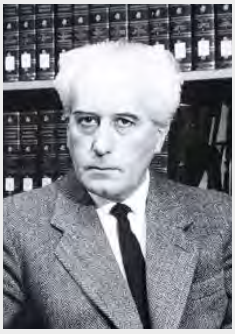
Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

(1840–1893)

Variations on a Rococo Theme, Op.33

Arranged for cello and strings by Bernard Rofe

Tchaikovsky wrote to one of his patrons, "It is thanks to Mozart that I devoted my life to music. I adore and idolise him." It should come as no surprise, then, that one of his most popular creations for soloist and orchestra should evoke his own nostalgia for the 18th century. The theme of Tchaikovsky's Variations is not actually Rococo in origin, but an original theme of the composer's devising, in the manner of Haydn and Mozart. After a brief orchestral introduction, the cello introduces the "Rococo" theme, which is then transformed across eight variations that showcase both the virtuosic and lyrical qualities of the cello. Tchaikovsky dedicated his Variations to German cellist Wilhelm Fitzenhagen, who made significant changes to the score, even re-ordering the variations and omitting the eighth. In these performances, we present Tchaikovsky's original version in a new arrangement for cello and string orchestra.



Sándor Veress

(1907–1992)

Four Transylvanian Dances

Sándor Veress was born in Transylvania, which was then part of the Kingdom of Hungary, and he studied composition with Hungarian composers Zoltán Kodály and Béla Bártok, who were both ethnomusicologists with a keen interest in Hungarian folk music. These *Four Transylvanian Dances* were written for the Basel Chamber Orchestra and its conductor Paul Sacher. Veress explains that his Dances are not settings or arrangements of actual folk melodies, but newly composed pieces based on dance genres from the Székely region of eastern Transylvania. The first, *Lassu*, is a moderately slow processional dance. The second, *Ugrós*, is a 'jumping dance' that begins with a single voice and develops through a fugue-like texture, climaxing with the entry of the double bass. Veress directed that the *Letjös* should be "danced with floating steps". It is built over a chromatic ostinato in the cellos, with its gliding melody given first to the violas and shared across the orchestra. The final movement, *Dobbantós*, is a wild stomping dance.

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, 1888.

Iannis Xenakis

(1922–2001)

Aroura

During World War II, Greek composer Iannis Xenakis experienced, first hand, what he and many artists perceived as the failure of European culture to prevent the world's annihilation. After his face was severly injured by an exploding shell, Xenakis searched beyond the western classical canon, and found inspiration in the ideas of classical Greece. *Aroura*, which translates as "Earth", comes from Homer's *Iliad* as part of a reference to the city-state of Athens, "the land of great-hearted Erechtheus" who was born of the earth rather than humans. In *Aroura*, Xenakis paints a musical picture of Athens and its surrounds through sonic textures: "The first impression of the earth that the eye receives is that of textures, for example fields, wood, soft earth." As the work unfolds, new textures and effects representing elemental laws are introduced and juxtaposed: tone-clusters, sliding glissandi, the growling of bows on the bridge, the clattering of the bow sticks on the strings. Although these sounds are highly experimental, they also reflect something very human: that Athenians could, literally, trace their ancestry to the very earth under their feet.

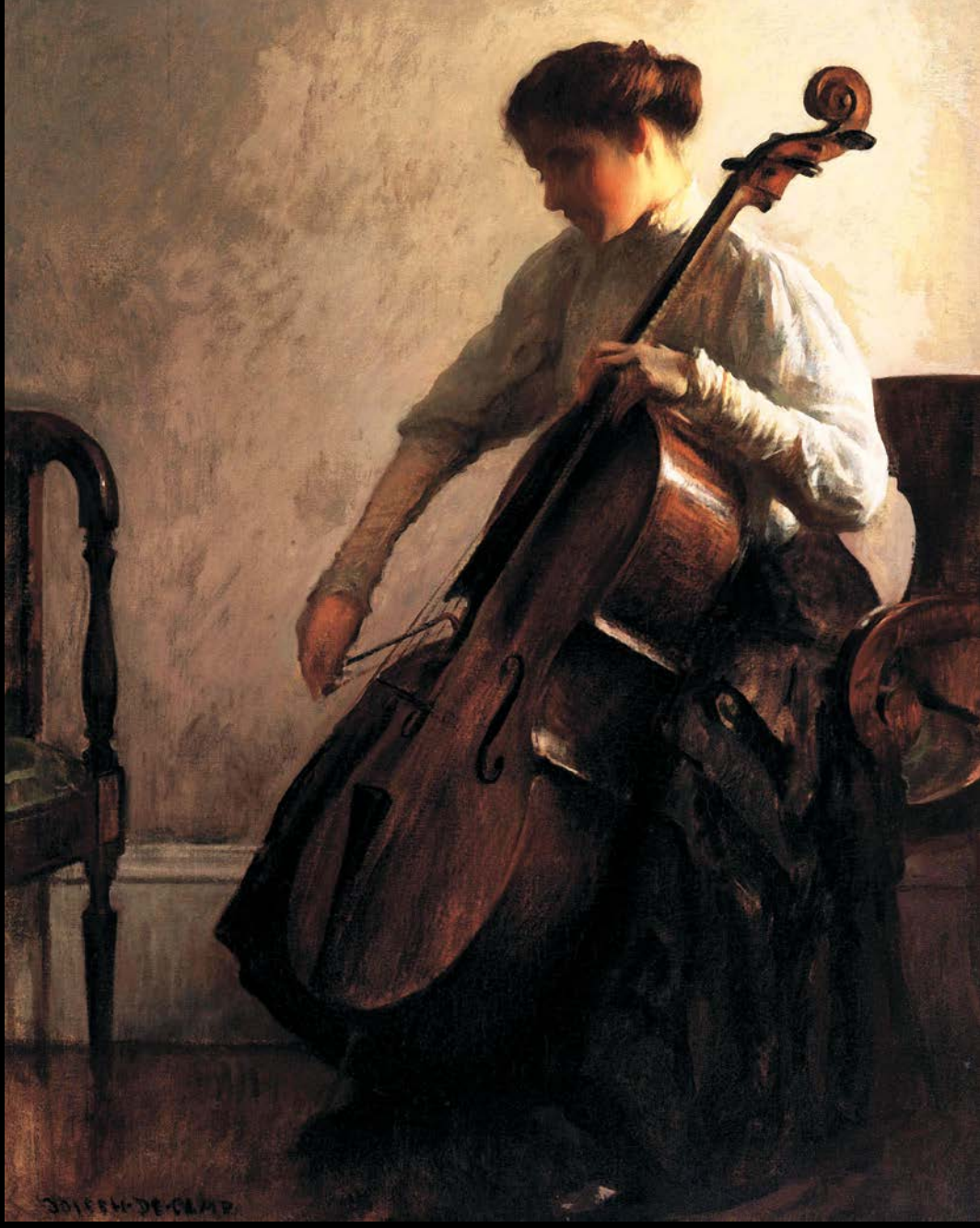
Haydn

Cello Concerto in C major

It is extraordinary to think that some of the best-known staples of the classical canon were lost and forgotten about for hundreds of years after their composition. For example, Bach's *Goldberg Variations* and Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* both fell into obscurity until their rediscovery in the early 20th century. Haydn's Cello Concerto in C major, one of his most popular and recognisable works, belongs to this group of long-forgotten masterpieces, going unperformed for some 200 years. A single set of parts was discovered in 1961 in Radenin Castle, Czechoslovakia, and the first modern performance was given in Prague the following year, led by Australian conductor Sir Charles Mackerras.

At the time of the work's composition, Haydn's career had received a significant boost after he was appointed Vice-Kapellmeister to Prince Paul Anton Esterhazy in 1761. One of his colleagues at the Kappell was court cellist Joseph Weigl, who became a longtime friend. It is almost certain that it was Weigl who premiered this concerto at one of their twice-weekly "Akademien" concerts. The sparklingly virtuosity of the outer movements, and the sustained beauty of line in the *Adagio*, indicate that Weigl had formidable technique and expressive breadth.


5.10.



Left: *The Cello Player* 1910, by Egon Schiele (1890–1918).
Above: *The Cellist* 1908, by Joseph Rodefer DeCamp (1858–1923).

Nicolas Altstaedt. Photo by Marco Borggreve.

SCORING A LIFE

As one of the world's most acclaimed cellists, Nicolas Altstaedt travels constantly – but, he says, his home is music.

Written by Chloe Hooper
Chloe Hooper is the award-winning author of *The Tall Man* and *The Arsonist*. Her latest book is *Bedtime Story*.

It's been a long, cold winter and Nicolas Altstaedt is enjoying the daylit hours of the northern spring. Staying in the Bavarian town of Landshut, in the foothills of the Alps, he's readying himself for recordings and performances in Europe and around the globe.

Around him, people are out making the most of the warm weather. Summer has arrived early, and the cellist and conductor is reminded of summers past. He and his older brother, acclaimed conductor Cristoph Altstaedt, would prepare for the holidays by visiting the library. Instead of borrowing books, however, the pair would check out orchestral scores.

Poring over the sheet music, the 10-year-old Altstaedt undertook what he regarded as "detective work". He could see how a score was notated, but when he checked it against different recordings, he learnt "how interpretations can vary based on one single score – that was a big fascination".

Christoph was into Bruckner's Symphony No.7 whereas Nicolas fell hard for the dark depths of Brahms's Fourth.

Were they like brothers arguing over football teams? "This is also very interesting," Altstaedt jokes. "Although, it depends on which teams."

Over the phone, it is clear Altstaedt has an acute ability to listen. It feels as if he is taking in every inflection of the interviewer. This in itself is not a surprise: close listening is a professional necessity. There's a grace to the way he receives questions, a generosity and thoughtfulness in his answers. With each program he curates, he feels a responsibility to grapple with classical music's thorniest questions.

"What is my responsibility now in the 21st century?" Altstaedt asks. "What does music mean nowadays? What is still relevant and what is important to be played, and what do we have to bring to the people? Music," he continues, "is always describing the human condition. It's done, of course, throughout the centuries in different styles, because humanity and society and nature are changing, but the questions remain the same. The masterworks will last forever, because they have eternal value and are not just bound to a certain time where it has been a fashion to perform those pieces."

He pauses. "You learn a lot by just looking around and discovering pieces and looking for connections. There's always something that you don't know or have not heard and then discover, and it's a learning process – we are students in the end."

Gidon Kremer.
Photo Angie Kremer.

Born to a German-French family in Heidelberg in 1982, Altstaedt grew up in the North Rhine-Westphalia town of Gütersloh, surrounded by “a lot of nature and flat green fields”. It was a childhood full of music in and outside the home. His father, a vascular surgeon, had a great passion for the arts and an extensive classical LP collection. Nicolas started listening to more contemporary composers. He found Shostakovich’s First Cello Concerto and played it over and over. “This was a big inspiration for me to learn the cello,” he says. He began as a six-year-old and felt an immediate affinity with the instrument.

The Altstaedts took their sons to concerts as often as possible. In the 1980s and ’90s, Gütersloh, with a population of 90,000, had a vibrant contemporary music festival. This was a halcyon time for a melophile, before globalisation and digitisation changed the performing landscape.

“I heard a lot of first performances, a lot of major works by major composers,” Altstaedt recalls. The Hungarian-Austrian composer, György Ligeti, visited several times to premiere work and “you meet the composer, you shake hands, you talk with them”. This access, Altstaedt acknowledges, was fundamental to his education. “It was kind of astonishing that something you expect to be happening in Paris or London was happening in such a small town.” One of Altstaedt’s first cello teachers played a lot of baroque music, introducing his student to the period instrumental movement, which champions historically authentic performances, and to one of the movement’s pioneers, the revered conductor Nikolaus Harnoncourt.

“The masterworks will last forever, because they have eternal value and are not just bound to a certain time where it has been a fashion to perform those pieces.”

"I have been lucky to come to Australia since 2008, but being invited to work and perform with the ACO is an inspiration, that surpasses many dreams."

"There was no internet," Altstaedt says, "but there were lots of documentaries done with Nikolaus Harnoncourt talking about music. We saw someone with this huge and very charismatic way of articulating his musical beliefs. That was very fascinating to watch." Harnoncourt became one of Altstaedt's idols, as did the conductor's collaborator, the Latvian violinist, Gidon Kremer. Kremer, he says, "created sound on the violin that was so highly personal and that hadn't really existed before. It was a new way of playing a stringed instrument. No one has done it in the same way. These two figures were, in my childhood, very influential personalities."

Altstaedt, performing with the Australian Chamber Orchestra for the first time, says he has followed its work closely for many years. "The ACO is a part of the world's cultural heritage," he says. "I have been lucky to come to Australia since 2008, but being invited to work and perform with the ACO is an inspiration, that surpasses many dreams. The ACO has an identity of the highest creativity and curiosity in its core, that I look forward to discovering and experiencing. I can only enter this collaboration with the most openminded spirit and see where it takes us all together."

He brings to his playing a combination of technical virtuosity, lyricism, warmth and a feel for both the epic and the absurd, often finding a wry moment to explore. *The New York Times* describes his style as "audacious, even radical" and *The Guardian* calls it "thrilling".

In 2003, while Altstaedt honed these gifts at the Hochschule für Musik Hanns Eisler Berlin, it was announced that Kremer would be visiting the University. The celebrated violinist was giving a public master class: anyone could apply and the young cellist added his name to the list.

Nicolas Altstaedt. Photo by Marco Borggreve

Nicolas Altstaedt. Photo by Marco Borggreve.

Nicolas Altstaedt.

After playing the Lutosławski Cello Concerto for Kremer, Altstaedt's childhood hero was sufficiently impressed to invite him to his chamber music festival in Lockenhaus, Austria – a yearly "anti-festival" that is considered a European cultural treasure. Altstaedt returned "basically every summer to try to see and listen to as many rehearsals and concerts as possible".

In 2010, 28-year-old Altstaedt came to international attention after being unanimously judged the winner of the prestigious Credit Suisse Young Artist Award. There followed, at the Lucerne Festival, his critically acclaimed performance of the Schumann Concerto with the Vienna Philharmonic, under Gustavo Dudamel. Soon after, another life-changing honour came his way. In 2012, Kremer entrusted Altstaedt with taking over from him as the Lockenhaus Festival's artistic director.

"That was, of course, one of the greatest gifts I received," he says, "because having a festival enables you to invite people that you admire and from whom you can learn. I can make music with people I adore." Altstaedt can also replicate the sense of openness and possibility he found in the music festivals of his youth. At Lockenhaus, rehearsals are largely open to the public, and the program is a set menu, posted only on the day of the concert. As *Strings* magazine puts it, he is "creating whole new paradigms for making classical music … the musicians Altstaedt recruits always include the leading edge of classical music's movers and shakers."

This may seem a long way from studying musical scores procured from the school library, although Altstaedt admits this long-ago hobby "probably led to what I'm doing now".

In this program, Altstaedt and the ACO have brought together composers that speak to each other across the centuries in unexpected ways.

From 2015–2022, Altstaedt served as artistic director of the Haydn Philharmonie – an appointment personally made by Ádám Fischer. After these years working at the old court in Esterházy, he feels deeply connected to the composer and the "milestone" Cello Concerto in C major. "And then we thought, what can we pair it with? Haydn's cultural background, going back to the Austro–Hungarian monarchy, suggested a Hungarian composer," he says – hence the selection of Sándor Veress, who himself studied Hungarian folk music with Béla Bartók, and his *Four Transylvanian Dances*.

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“How can you perform a work in the way the composer wants it to be? It’s a never-ending fascination.”

Haydn’s *Seven Last Words of Christ* shares a spiritual connection with György Kurtág’s *Officium breve in memoriam Andreae Szervánszky*, and both works also grapple with time. Haydn described writing the orchestral piece’s extremely long movements as one of the greatest challenges of his life. Kurtag, on the other hand, wrote his “short, aphoristic pieces” in 12 minutes. Altstaedt is fascinated by the way these composers “both achieved eternity but in very different measures”. “Haydn builds a new musical language without following up on role models and is the composer of the age of enlightenment, that impacts our music right up to today,” he says. “He reinvents himself with each piece and is therefore someone you can call an avant-gardist.”

Tchaikovsky’s *Rococo Variations* is a paean to a period that overlapped Haydn’s lifetime and shows Altstaedt’s gift for delving into the sinew of repertoire. It is important to him to play Tchaikovsky’s original version, which until recently was erased by the better-known interpretation of the 19th-century cellist, Wilhelm Fitzenhagen. “Our task is to read the mind of a composer and to see behind the notation,” he says. “How can you perform a work in the way the composer wants it to be? It’s a never-ending fascination.”

Finally, Altstaedt feels an affinity with the brilliant 20th-century polymath, Iannis Xenakis. Xenakis’ piece *Aroura*, he says, “is something not to talk about too much, but to experience”. “It’s a very rough and present and powerful piece, which sometimes makes the 18th-century pieces sound more modern, because our ears are opened up by rough sounds.”

With lauded seasons leading orchestras across Europe and around the world, Altstaedt is in ever-increasing demand as a performer and conductor. He works closely conducting OPRF Paris and the Munich and Scottish Chamber Orchestras, which he believes complements his playing. The performer’s quest for individual perfection is tempered by the conductor’s need for harmonic cohesion and fidelity to the architecture of the piece.

At this point in his stellar career, Altstaedt finds himself travelling almost constantly. Recently, he's begun to wonder whether the solution to never being home is to stay on the road.

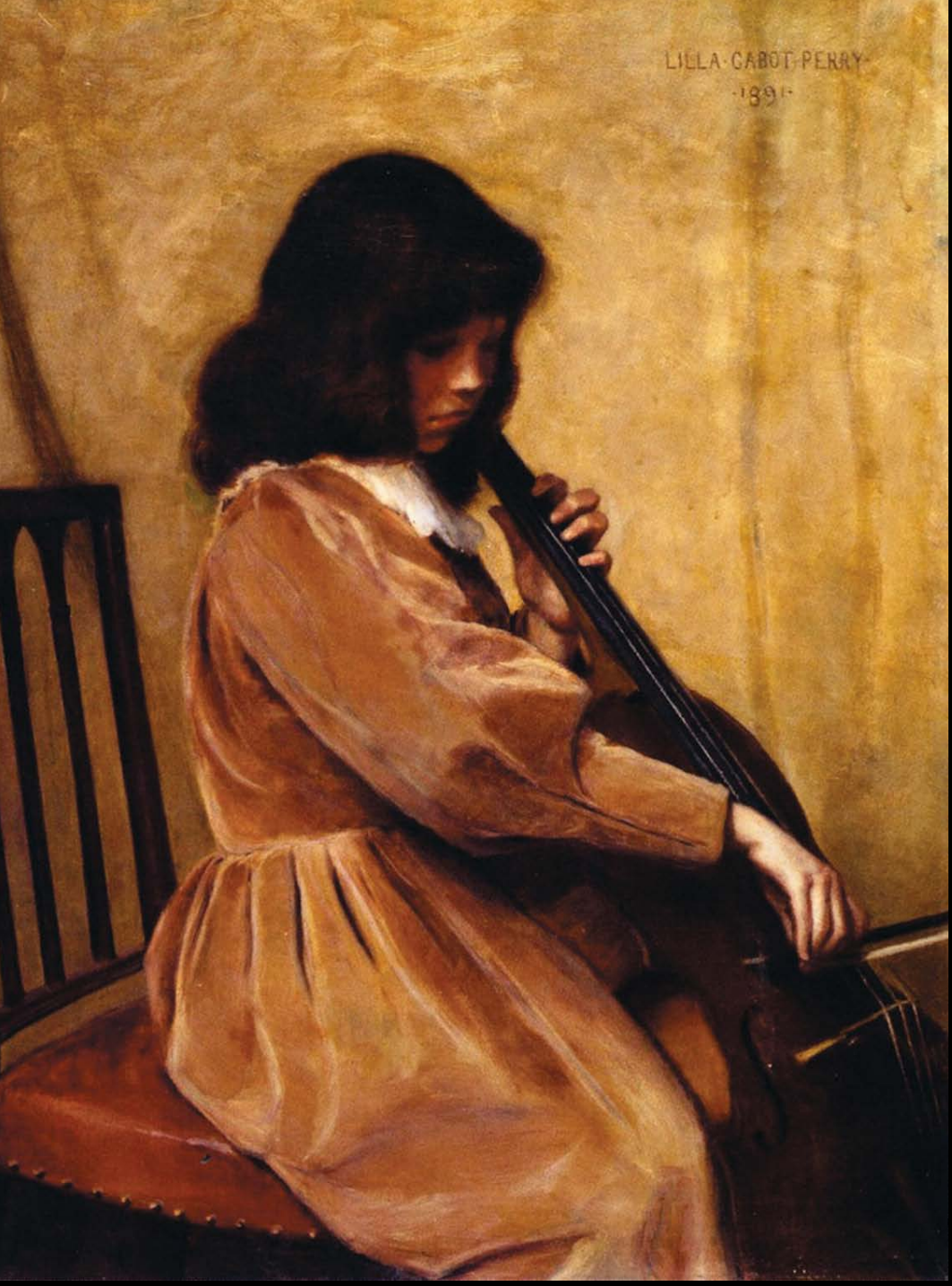
"Perhaps I don't really need a place to go back to for, like, one or two days a month," he says. Europe, conveniently enough, has an abundance of musical cities right next to each other, "and so you always end up going, and performing, and you have lots of friends with whom you share these passions".

"Musicians, we share the same spirit, and, our home is the music, so I try to be with people with whom I can talk, and feel, and understand the same language," he says. "So, for me the musical family of friends is more important than the geographical one. And then I don't think so much of where I should go, where I should be, or where I should live. I just try to constantly get inspired, and learn from and be with people that keep me healthy with their art. And I feel very thankful to have a lot of people I can constantly see on the road. I think that is for me what home is."

In 2018, Altstaedt met – so to speak – his constant travelling companion. In a London dealer's rooms, he played his 1749 G.B. Guadagnini cello for the first time. "I pretty much knew. That's the *one*." He is droll about the inevitable romantic insinuation, a cliché that's hard to avoid. He kept the instrument for another few weeks to be sure, "that my impression was not a wrong one", that he was not rushing headlong into the relationship. "But then I was very sure that this is the instrument that I will learn from, hopefully over many years."

One of the mysteries of the instrument is that it has great power despite being smaller than other celli. "It has a very round and horizontal sound that is always astonishing to hear, the bass especially is huge. It's an enigma to understand how it has the bass evolved. But, I would say, it's a performer-friendly instrument. When you know how to handle it, it will be nice to you."

In the midst of perpetual motion, Altstaedt finds something reassuring about the instrument's constancy. There are times on the road when he unpacks the cello from the case and suddenly it doesn't matter if he's in his own room or in a hotel. "Okay," he thinks to himself. "I'm back at home."



Right: *The Cellist* date unknown, by Lilla Cabot Perry (1848–1933).
Above: *Girl Playing a Cello* 1891, by Lilla Cabot Perry (1848–1933).

JOY & PURPOSE

For violinist Ilya Isakovich, joining the Australian Chamber Orchestra was the hardest decision of his life. Twenty years on, he says it was also his best.

By Fiona Wright
Fiona Wright is a writer, editor and critic from Sydney. Her most recent book of essays, *The World Was Whole*, was published in 2018.

Ilya Isakovich. Photo by Charlie Kinross.

Ilya Isakovich says he was “doomed” to play the violin. Doomed, because his father played this instrument, and his grandfather too – and, because unlike most children in the Soviet Union at the time, he had access to a beautiful, high-quality violin. It was a German violin, he explains, that his grandfather, who had served as a violinist in the Soviet army during World War II, brought back from Berlin in 1945: he had been part of the forces that advanced into that city at the bitter, street-fought end of the war. Isakovich grew up listening to his grandfather play this instrument, and then, when he was old enough, got to play it himself.

He has never been a stranger to instruments with history.

“I was doomed,” he repeats, chuckling – he has a magnificent, throaty, free and frequent chuckle. “But the violin, it really is the best instrument. So it doesn’t matter.”

He adds: “Don’t tell the others I said that.” For some reason, not all his colleagues agree.

—

This year is Isakovich’s 20th with the ACO – and after more than two decades, he still remembers the first time he heard the Orchestra play.

It was in Bologna, Italy, on the evening after he auditioned for the outfit, in the few spare hours he had before boarding his flight back home. He remembers this so clearly because he spent the entire performance “just sitting and smiling”, grinning from ear to ear.

“I had never heard an orchestra perform with such joy and purpose,” he says. “You could literally touch the energy on stage. And I thought, wow, I have just heard something truly great.”

It was the importance of his audition, of all that it might mean, that hit him in that moment.

—

“Every violin, every instrument,” Isakovich says, “they all have their own character. Your job is to learn to work with that, to adjust.” The musician has to learn how to make each instrument “sing” in its own particular voice, and not get in the way.

With the ACO, Isakovich plays a 1590 Brothers Amati violin. When he speaks about it, his face glows. It is an instrument, he explains, “from the very beginning, when modern classical instruments started to be made” and the second-oldest instrument in the ACO’s possession, on loan to the Orchestra from the ACO Instrument Fund. Its voice, Isakovich says, is “beautifully dark, and...” – he pauses for a moment, searching for the right word – “velvety.”

In playing the Amati, he says, the challenge is that “it sings almost by itself”. And so he needs to play “with no force whatsoever, to just let it sing”. His playing needs “to be more free”.

–

The decision to join the ACO, Isakovich says, was one of the most difficult of his life. When he passed that audition in Bologna, he was living in Israel as a member of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra – the best orchestra, he says, in Israel and one of the best in the world. It had also long been the locus of his ambition.

Isakovich asked the Israel Philharmonic to grant him unpaid leave to undertake his three-month ACO trial – but the orchestra refused. “They did not want to let me go,” he says. He had to choose between “breaking with this organisation” where he had a secure job, and “forfeiting the opportunity” – that joy, that purpose, that palpable energy – he had been given.

“But I took the chance,” he says. “And now,” – 20 years later – “here I am.”

–

Isakovich says his first year in Australia – his trial and then probation with the ACO – was an incredibly challenging and stressful time. He admits that the confidence he had was “a lucky one”, born of ignorance about exactly what he was getting himself into.

“I had to change so much, mentally and professionally,” he says, to understand and fit in with the ACO’s style of playing, which was so different to all that he had known. A big symphony orchestra, like the ones he had played in, is as different from the ACO “as a marathon to a 100-metre sprint”. He had taken a much bigger gamble than he had imagined.

“I had never heard an orchestra perform with such joy and purpose,” he says. “You could literally touch the energy on stage.”

Ilya Isakovich.
Photo by Charlie Kinross.

But what he found, he says, is that in the smaller ensemble, everyone is able "to be appreciated for the musician that they are". In this setting, everyone has more responsibility and more opportunity. Everyone is more valuable. "It's just mathematics," he chuckles. "But it's amazing."

–

When I ask Isakovich about his favourite composer, he doesn't hesitate for a moment. "Bach," he says. "Bach is like God.

"But underneath that, underneath God, I love Tchaikovsky, Mahler, Brahms: all of the romantics." Something in the way he says this makes me suspect that Isakovich, too, is a romantic.

In this setting, everyone has more responsibility and more opportunity. Everyone is more valuable. “It’s just mathematics,” he chuckles. “But it’s amazing.”

Tchaikovsky in particular has a special place in Isakovich’s heart: his Violin Concerto is the piece he played for his audition with the ACO – that he has played for all of his auditions, everywhere, in fact – and it is still his favourite piece to perform.

In (then-Soviet) Ukraine, where he was born and raised, Isakovich grew up surrounded by Russian music. “And so Tchaikovsky,” he says, “something in that music touches my soul.

“It is mine, I always think. It is my music.”

–

A few years before he joined the ACO, Isakovich had come to Sydney while on tour with the Israel Philharmonic. He has also never forgotten the harbour cruise the orchestra was taken on then, his awe and delight at the beauty of the city. “I remember thinking, wouldn’t that be amazing, to live in a city like this?” he says. “Wouldn’t it be a dream?”

When we talk, we are sitting near the ACO’s new quarters, on the Walsh Bay piers stretching out into the harbour. It’s a misty, rainy day – the kind of weather in which the harbour is rugged and wild looking and more stunning, I always think, than the glittering face it shows in the sun. We both keep pausing to watch the water for a moment, steely grey and tossing.

“When I started here, we worked in Circular Quay,” Isakovich says “I lived in Kirribilli, and I would walk to work each day across the bridge. And every day I’d think, this is amazing. This is heaven.”

A little later, he adds: “I have the best workplace in the world.”

Angels Making Music 1645–1655, by Cornelis Schut (1597–1655).

NICOLAS ALTSTAEDT

Director & Cello

German-French cellist Nicolas Altstaedt is one of the most sought-after and versatile artists today. As a soloist, conductor, and artistic director, he performs repertoire spanning from early music to contemporary, playing on period and modern instruments.

Since his highly acclaimed debut with Wiener Philharmoniker and Gustavo Dudamel at the Lucerne Festival, recent notable residencies and collaborations include Budapest Festival Orchestra, SWR Sinfonieorchester Baden-Baden und Freiburg, Helsinki Festival, Symphonieorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks, Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin, Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra, Tonhalle-Orchester Zürich, Royal Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra, Münchner Philharmoniker, European Union Youth Orchestra, all the BBC orchestras, Orchestre National de France with Cristian Măcelaru, NHK and Yomiuri Nippon symphony orchestras, Washington's National Symphony Orchestra, and Sydney and New Zealand symphony orchestras.

Altstaedt regularly performs on period instruments with ensembles such as Il Giardino Armonico, B'Rock, La Cetra, Academy of Ancient Music, and Orchestra of the Eighteenth Century. As a conductor, he has forged close partnerships with Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France, Scottish Chamber Orchestra, Münchener Kammerorchester and Les Violons du Roy.

Joint appearances with composers such as Thomas Adès, Jörg Widmann, Thomas Larcher, Fazıl Say and Sofia Gubaidulina consolidate his reputation as an outstanding interpreter of contemporary music, while Wolfgang Rihm, Sebastian Fagerlund and Helena Winkelman have recently written concertos and other works for him.

In 2012, Altstaedt succeeded Gidon Kremer as Artistic Director of the Lockenhaus Chamber Music Festival, and from 2014 to 2021 he succeeded Ádám Fischer in this position at the Haydn Philharmonie at the Ésterházy Palace. He performs at both Salzburg Mozart and Summer festivals, Verbier Festival, BBC Proms, Lucerne Festival, Prague Spring Festival and Musikfest Bremen.

His most recent recording for the Lockenhaus Festival garnered the 2020 BBC Music Magazine Chamber Award and the 2020 Gramophone Classical Music Award. He received the 2017 BBC Music Magazine Concerto Award for his recording of CPE Bach Concertos on Hyperion with Arcangelo and Jonathan Cohen and the 2017 AFAS Edison Klassiek for his recital recording with Fazıl Say on Warner Classics. Altstaedt was a recipient of the Credit Suisse Award in 2010, Beethovenring Bonn in 2015, Musikpreis der Stadt Duisburg in 2018 and was a 2010–12 BBC New Generation Artist.

Photo by Marco Borggreve

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Led by Artistic Director Richard Tognetti since 1990, the ACO performs more than 100 concerts each year. Whether performing in Manhattan, New York, or Wollongong, NSW, the ACO is unwavering in its commitment to creating transformative musical experiences. The Orchestra regularly collaborates with artists and musicians who share its ideology, from instrumentalists, to vocalists, to cabaret performers, to visual artists and film makers.

In addition to its national and international touring schedule, the ACO has an active recording program across CD, vinyl and digital formats. Recent releases include *Water | Night Music*, the first Australian-produced classical vinyl for two decades, *Beethoven 1, 2, & 3 Eroica* and ARIA award-winning albums *River* and *Indies & Idols*.

In 2023 the ACO launched its digital streaming platform, ACO On Demand, which hosts the Orchestra's award-winning season of cinematic concert films, *ACO StudioCasts*, alongside live concert streams and premium on-demand content.

aco.com.au

Left: *Frederick, Prince Of Wales, And His Sisters* c 1733, by Philippe Mercier (1689–1760).
Above: *The Player Schneklud* 1894, by Paul Gauguin (1848–1903).

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