

Australian Chamber Orchestra

50TH ANNIVERSARY SEASON

AACO

ABEL SELAOCOE

PRINCIPAL PARTNER


Wesfarmers Arts

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50TH ANNIVERSARY CIRCLE

Help us blaze a trail into our next 50 years by joining ACO GOLD – our special golden anniversary circle – to celebrate this key moment in our story.

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[ACO.COM.AU/GOLD](https://aco.com.au/gold)

Australian
Chamber
Orchestra **50** Years

INSIDE

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.

Cover.
Abel Selaocoe.
Photo by
Christina Ebenezer

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#ACO25Season



@AustralianChamberOrchestra

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WELCOME

I am absolutely delighted to welcome the brilliant cellist Abel Selaocoe as he makes his much-anticipated Australian debut with the ACO. Abel is a truly extraordinary musician, whose joyous and charismatic performances have captivated audiences across the world—from revered concert halls and international festivals to iconic club venues.

On this tour, we are thrilled that Abel will not only share some of his own compositions but also join our Principal Cello, Timo-Veikko ‘Tipi’ Valve, for the Australian premiere of Giovanni Sollima’s electrifying double concerto, *When We Were Trees*.

Also premiering tonight is *Ascension*, a breathtaking new work by beloved Australian composer Nigel Westlake. Commissioned by the ACO, Nigel wrote this piece in memory of his late mother, Heather Westlake, who was herself a violinist with the ACO in the 1980s. As explored in an interview on page 20 of this program, Heather had a deep and enduring love for Vaughan Williams’ *The Lark Ascending*, and Nigel found himself reflecting on the profound humanity and beauty of this music while composing *Ascension*.

ACO audiences will know how vital philanthropy is in enabling our national performance footprint, with philanthropic gifts contributing some 40% of our annual revenue. Tonight, I pay special tribute to Peter Crossing and his family, whose generous support through the Belalberi Foundation has made Abel’s performances on this tour possible. The ACO simply could not deliver programs of this innovation, ambition and reach without the dedication of patrons like Peter and his family, and we are deeply grateful for their generosity.

Thank you for joining us for what promises to be an unforgettable musical experience. We hope you enjoy the performance!



Richard Evans AM
Managing Director



Wesfarmers Arts



Australian Chamber Orchestra & Wesfarmers Arts
Bringing People & Music Together

NEWS

Upcoming concerts and the latest announcements.

Latest News

ACO Foundations

Victoria Launch

With the support of our University Partner, the University of Melbourne, we were delighted to launch our award-winning instrumental learning program, ACO Foundations, at Victoria's Belle Vue Park Primary School earlier this year.

Eleven ACO musicians spent the day with 60 Year 1 and 2 students at the school, who each received their very own violin or cello to play in the classroom together every day.

Underpinned by the core belief that all children deserve access to a quality music education, ACO Foundations is a research-based program that has been proven to improve children's cognitive, emotional, and behavioural development through the daily practice of a string instrument within the classroom environment.

Tchaikovsky | Shostakovich

Album Release

As part of the Orchestra's 50th-anniversary celebrations, the ACO has recently released a brand-new album with ABC Classic, *Tchaikovsky | Shostakovich*.

Featuring Tchaikovsky's beloved Serenade for Strings and Shostakovich's Chamber Symphony in C minor, this extraordinary recording showcases the ACO at its exhilarating best.

This recording is available on CD and digital. To listen or purchase online, visit snd.click/ACOTchaikShost

1. ACO Foundations launch at Victoria's Belle Vue Park Primary School



On Tour

Theremin & Beyond

8-20 MAY
National Tour

Richard Tognetti directs an eclectic program starring Carolina Eyck, the internationally renowned superstar of the theremin. When Eyck plays, out pours a melody that looks, and sounds, like magic. From the music of JS Bach to the iconic *Star Trek* theme, this is a concert full of fun that will take you to other worlds.

2.
Carolina Eyck

3.
Patricia
Kopatchinskaja

4.
The Princess, The Pea
(and The Brave
Escapee)



2

Death and the Maiden Revealed

21-30 JUN
National Tour

Patricia Kopatchinskaja is experimental, unpredictable and brilliant. The acclaimed violinist returns to the ACO to direct a tour that showcases her dynamic virtuosity and enormous range, from Ravel's showpiece *Tzigane* to Schubert's *Death and the Maiden*.



3

ACO Families

The Princess, The Pea (and The Brave Escapee)

13-20 JUL
ACO On The Pier

There is the fairytale you know and love... but what isn't known is why our brave princess was out in the middle of a storm, in the middle of a night, at the end of an adventure. This is *that* story.

This stunning theatrical production comes alive with classical music performed live by ACO musicians. It's perfect for audiences of all ages who need a reminder that they can be brave, even if they feel scared of the unknown.



4

Australian Chamber Orchestra



THEREMIN & BEYOND

DIRECTED BY RICHARD TOGNETTI

8-20 MAY

Wollongong, Sydney, Brisbane,
Melbourne and Canberra.

Tickets from \$49* | \$35* for U35s

*Transaction fee of \$8.50 applies

Journey to other worlds with
theremin superstar Carolina Eyck.
Featuring stage and screen classics
from Bach to The Beach Boys.

ACO.COM.AU

PRINCIPAL PARTNER



GOVERNMENT PARTNERS



Pre-Concert Talks

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

WOLLONGONG TOWN HALL

Francis Merson

Thu 3 Apr, 6.45pm

SYDNEY – CITY RECITAL HALL

Francis Merson

Sat 5 Apr, 6.15pm

Tue 8 Apr, 7.15pm

Wed 9 Apr, 6.15pm

SYDNEY OPERA HOUSE

Francis Merson

Sun 6 Apr, 1.15pm

CANBERRA – LLEWELLYN HALL

Francis Merson

Mon 7 Apr, 6.45pm

MELBOURNE RECITAL CENTRE

Kym Dillon

Sat 12 Apr, 6.45pm

Mon 14 Apr, 6.45pm

ARTS CENTRE MELBOURNE

Kym Dillon

Sun 13 Apr, 1.45pm

ADELAIDE TOWN HALL

Russell Torrance

Tue 15 Apr, 6.45pm

Abel Selaocoe's performances are generously supported by the Belalberi Foundation – Peter Crossing Family.

PROGRAM

Abel Selaocoe Director & Cello
Sidiki Dembélé Percussion
Helena Rathbone Lead Violin

Timo-Veikko Valve Cello
Australian Chamber Orchestra

COMPOSER	TITLE	MIN
Abel Selaocoe	Introduction / Improvisation	5
Abel Selaocoe	Qhawe (Hero)#	6
Giovanni Benedetto Platti	Cello Concerto in D major, WD650 <i>I. Allegro</i> <i>II. Adagio</i> <i>III. Allegro</i>	13
Abel Selaocoe	Tshepo (Faith)#	6
Nigel Westlake	Ascension (<i>World Premiere</i>)*†	12
Interval		20
Giovanni Sollima	When We Were Trees: Selections# <i>I. Resonance Wood (La Foresta Dei Violini)</i> <i>II. The Architect</i> <i>III. Leaves Postcards</i> <i>IV. The Dangerous Prevalence of Imagination</i> <i>VI. The Family Tree (Vivaldi)</i>	18
Abel Selaocoe	Lerato (Love)#	5
Abel Selaocoe	Ka Bohaleng (On the Sharp Side)#	5

Australian Premiere

* Commissioned by the Australian Chamber Orchestra.

†The Westlake will be led by ACO Principal Violin Helena Rathbone.

The concert will last approximately two hours and 20 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. *Abel Selaocoe* will be broadcast live from Sydney Opera House on Sunday 6 April, 2pm and available on demand for 30 days after.

MUSICIANS ON STAGE

Learn more about our musicians, go behind the scenes and watch ACO StudioCast films at: acoondemand.com.au



Abel Selaocoe
Director and Cello

Abel plays a copy of a c. 1735 Montagnana cello, made by Robin Aitchison in 2020 with the generous support of the Alan Powell Trust.



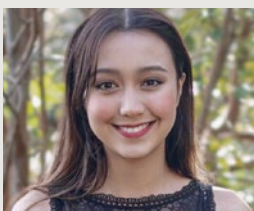
Sidiki Dembélé
Percussion

Sidiki plays percussion instruments including Djembe, Calabash and Kamelen N'goni instruments provided by African Drumming.



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. Her Chair is sponsored by Alenka Tindale.



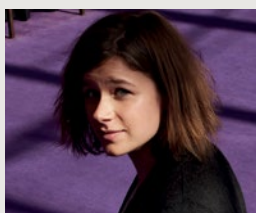
Aiko Goto
Violin

Aiko plays the 1714 'ex-Isolde Menges' Giuseppe Guarneri filius Andrea violin kindly on loan from the ACO Instrument Fund. 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.



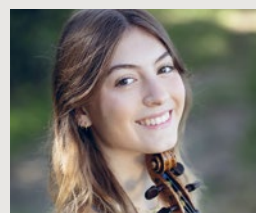
Thibaud Pavlovic-Hobba
Violin

Thibaud plays a 1756 Giovanni Battista Gabrielli violin kindly on loan from Helena Rathbone. His chair is sponsored by The Minta Group.



Ike See
Violin

Ike plays his own 2021 Zygmuntowicz violin. His Chair is sponsored by Ian Lansdown & Tricia Bell.



Beatrice Colombis#
Violin

Beatrice plays her own late 18th-century violin made by Thomas Perry.



Ruth Gibson#
Principal Viola

Ruth plays a circa 1800 Italian Castello viola.



Elizabeth Woolnough
Viola

Elizabeth plays a 1952 A.E. Smith viola, kindly on loan from the ACO. Her Chair is sponsored by Terry Campbell AO & Christine Campbell.



Karina Schmitz#
Viola

Karina's viola was made by Hiroshi Iizuka in Philadelphia in 1984.



Timo-Veikko Valve
Principal Cello

Tipi plays a 1616 Brothers Amati cello kindly on loan from the ACO Instrument Fund. His Chair is sponsored by Prof Doug Jones AO & Prof Janet Walker CM.



Melissa Barnard
Cello

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



Julian Thompson
Cello

Julian plays a 1729 Giuseppe Guarneri filius Andrea 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 UKARIA.

Guest Musicians

PROGRAM IN SHORT

Your five-minute read
before lights down.



Abel Selaocoe (1992-)

Qhawe, Tshepo, Lerato, Ka Bohaleng
(Australian Premieres)

Cellist, singer and composer Abel Selaocoe creates music that rises above place, time and style. With its roots in his homeland of South Africa and European art music, all of Selaocoe's music comes out as part of the same human expression. Improvisation and spontaneity are central to Selaocoe's presence as a musician, and are abundant in the works he has chosen for these concerts. Selaocoe writes:

Qhawe means "hero", and this song is dedicated to my nephew. It speaks of finding refuge in the playfulness and infectious energy and spirit of children. In the Apostolic (Postola) Church tradition of South Africa it is the children who are largely responsible for the music making: without their singing, nobody moves, and when the children sing, everyone dances. They are in charge of providing the spiritual impetus for the whole ceremony – a powerful role. The nature of this Postola music is incredibly and beautifully rhythmic. There is often a woman beating a large bass drum on either side throughout a song, providing an impulse as the children sing along.

Lerato means "love" in Sesotho. It can be used as a name for a child or to tell people we love them: "lerato". Through this song I was searching for something universal within the human race, and that is love. We are all made in one image, possessing the qualities of the world that are pure, that are full of love and that can be translated in all languages. The sound world of the song comes from a South African hymn-singing scene. In my home church we have a way of singing all of our own – one that is really rhythmic. We sometimes take out our Bibles and beat on them as a group, creating this wonderful bass sound, and that's what you hear all the way through, plus a kind of sway, a kind of rhythm that feels like it just lives within the space of the song. In this way lerato lives within you, within me and within all people.

Ka Bohaleng means "on the sharp side", a title alluding to a Sesotho saying that goes: "A woman holds the knife on the sharp side", in other words –

by the blade. This conjures an incredible image of bravery, strength and an understanding of pain – an image depicting the courage, liveliness, initiative and sacrifice of mothers everywhere. These are important qualities in a person you look up to for guidance, as a mentor and protector.

In a traditional South African household, the father would go off to work and the mother would raise the children, girls and boys. My brother and I were taught how to be men by our mother. We often draw support and comfort from our mothers.

Ka Bohaleng celebrates mothers: sources of strength and good counsel. This song is dedicated to them.

Tshepo (*Tshepo* note by Hugh Morris) means “faith” in Tswana. For Selaocoe, who was brought up around traditional spiritual practices as well as attending churches, faith is more a universal feeling, closer to the Sesotho verb “tshepa”: hope. Still, the musical atmosphere is prayer-like, and the setting – a lone vocalist with airy string support, occasionally breaking out into plush, expansive gestures – brings out a different vocal character in Selaocoe.

If the first part of *Tshepo* is searching unsurely for hope, then the second is an affirmation: that hope exists, and that it can be spoken into existence. The Rapela kicks in dramatically, with large vocal forces summoned from nowhere, learning a prayer text through repetition. The *Tshepo* theme eventually reappears at the close, faith reaffirmed.

Musical arrangements by Benjamin Woodgates (*Qhawe*), Fred Thomas (*Tshepo, Lerato*) and Ian Gardiner (*Ka Bohaleng*).

Giovanni Benedetto Platti (1687-1763) **Cello Concerto in D major, WD650**

Born in Italy and trained in Venice, Giovanni Benedetto Platti left his home country to work in the wealthy surrounds of the Würzburg court, where he became a distinguished oboist, singer and composer. His music is firmly rooted in the Italian Baroque tradition of Antonio Vivaldi and Arcangelo Corelli, even creating concerto grosso settings of Corelli’s chamber sonatas. His music, full of appealing zest and colour, has seen a huge resurgence in the 21st century.

Platti composed no fewer than 23 cello concertos, most of which follow Vivaldi’s three- and four-movement model. But where Vivaldi’s solo writing has a tendency for showy theatrics, Platti’s solo cello is clearly inspired by his own background as a singer, featuring exquisite melodic lines throughout.

The first movement could easily have been set with text as an opera aria, as could the arioso second movement. The cello lets its hair down in the Allegro finale, dancing joyfully amongst the vigorous scales and dramatic off beats of the orchestra.



Nigel Westlake (1958-) ***Ascension* (World Premiere)**

The composer writes:

The Lark Ascending by Ralph Vaughan Williams holds iconic status for all violinists as one of the sublime pinnacles of the repertoire. My mother performed it several times early in her career, and many decades later it became the soundtrack of choice during her final days. *Ascension* is dedicated to the memory of my mother, Heather Westlake (née Sumner), who recently passed away aged 95, and is an intimate dialogue between strings, distilled from a deeply personal expression of treasured recollections.

Reflecting on Heather’s life and career during the composition process, (she played with the ACO in the 1980s), I found myself revisiting the gentle warmth and skyward rising melodies of *The Lark*, perhaps secretly hoping that some of its glorious magic might leave a faint fingerprint on the score. “Now, when I’m gone” she would exclaim with a characteristic wry smile, “...I don’t want any fuss or musical dedications please!” She probably guessed I wasn’t listening.

Ascension was commissioned by the Australian Chamber Orchestra for the Orchestra’s 50th-anniversary celebrations.



Giovanni Sollima (1962-)

When We Were Trees: Selections
(Australian Premiere)

The double cello concerto *When We Were Trees*, by Italian composer and virtuoso cellist Giovanni Sollima, pays tribute to the roots of stringed instruments and their construction, from their intricately carved wood, to the forests that give birth to them. Inspiration for the work came, in part, from a single tree that stands outside Sollima's house in Palermo: "a large magnolia tree with a strange energy whose long branches touch upon the balcony". The six movements proceed to take us on a journey from the mysterious call of this magnolia tree into the ancient forests of Italy.

When composing the movement *La Foresta dei Violini* (Forest of Violins), Sollima imagined the great violin maker Antonio Stradivari and "how he strolls through the forest of Paneveggio to listen to the trees and the wood that are so close to the sounds of his instruments". While composing the movement *The Architect*, Sollima recalled meeting an African architect who builds tree houses. Of the movement *Leaves Postcards*, Sollima remembers hearing that "in earlier times, magnolia leaves were sent out on the initiative of a noble Sicilian. It was the relatives of immigrants in America who sent these magnolia leaves out into the world." The journey ends in the wild sonic space of *The Family Tree* (Vivaldi), with its vivid allusions to the concertos of Vivaldi, set alongside the frenzied calls of a family of tree birds.

ACO OnThePier

Coming up at
our Harbourside
home in Sydney



ACO Up Close: Reich & Golijov

3 MAY

Experience the coming together of two modern musical titans Steve Reich and Osvaldo Golijov in this special program that explores the transformative power of music. Featuring an ACO string quartet with Richard Tognetti.

Memoir of a Snail Live in Concert

6-8 JUNE

See Academy Award®-winning director Adam Elliot's latest film featuring a star-studded cast including Sarah Snook and Eric Bana, with live music from the ACO and special guests Elena Kats-Chernin (piano) and James Crabb (accordion).

ACO Families: The Princess, The Pea (and The Brave Escapee)

13-20 JULY

Enjoy the return season of this imaginative theatrical production brought to life on stage with live music performed by an ACO string quartet. Audiences of all ages will delight in this enchanting story of bravery, courage, and friendship.

The Neilson, ACO On The Pier
Tickets from \$39* | \$35* for U35s

*Transaction fee of \$8.50 applies

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S O N G S



Whether he's playing Bach or his own compositions, the unclassifiable and daring performances of South African cellist Abel Selacoe have made him a global star.

OF

JOY

Written by Sisonke Msimang

In 1986, the South African photographer Santu Mofokeng produced a series of images called *Train Church*. It was an ode to Black commuters who prayed as they rode on packed passenger trains that shuttled them back and forth between their homes in Soweto and the centre of Johannesburg, where they were employed in menial jobs legislated for them by the apartheid regime.

In one photo a preacher holds his Bible open; in another a woman stands with her mouth wide in religious ecstasy. Years later, Mofokeng wrote that the pictures captured “the experience of commuting and the pervasiveness of spirituality”. He argued this constituted “the most significant features of South African life”.

Like the commuters in Mofokeng’s photos, cellist and singer Abel Selaocoe grew up travelling on trains. He also grew up in the church, with rhythms that channelled both Christianity and African traditions that predated the arrival of Europeans. Selaocoe has a keen understanding of the still-dominant landscape of South African segregation, although he grew up in post-apartheid South Africa, free of the subjugation that marked his parents’ lives.

Selaocoe is making his Australian debut with the Australian Chamber Orchestra, bringing with him the vitality and innovation that have thrilled audiences worldwide. Since he burst onto the international stage with his BBC Proms debut in 2021, he has garnered hundreds of thousands of fans from across the globe. He makes music look easy. Selaocoe can play a Bach cello suite as comfortably as one of his own compositions.

Much of the excitement in his music comes from his apparent refusal to choose where he belongs. For the ACO he will perform four of his own compositions – *Qhawe*, *Tshepo*, *Lerato* and *Ka Bohaleng* – each of which is steeped in the stories of South African life. Loosely translated, “Qhawe” means hero, “Tshepo” means hope and “Lerato” means love. “Ka Bohaleng” – an allusion to a proverb that says “a woman will always hold the knife on the sharp side” – is a tribute to the fearlessness of mothers. In these compositions Selaocoe seamlessly blends the music of his childhood with his expansive world view.

Selaocoe will also perform *When We Were Trees*, a double cello concerto by Italian cellist and composer Giovanni Sollima, alongside ACO Principal



“This is what Selaocoe does best: he stretches and contorts the canon even as he honours and respects the music that has come before him.”

Cello Timo-Veikko Valve. Selaocoe has long admired Sollima for his “open-ended exploration” of the cello and has performed his compositions across his career, including an arrangement of Sollima’s *Lamentatio* that includes a Zulu song. In Selaocoe’s hands it becomes a song of mourning that gathers in intensity then ebbs exquisitely, before it picks up speed again for a finale that pays homage to the Italian drama of its lineage. This is what Selaocoe does best: he stretches and contorts the canon even as he honours and respects the music that has come before him.

He tells me that he is drawn to traditional music from all over the world. “It all speaks to the same themes,” he says. “No matter where in the world it comes from, music rooted in tradition has always been about the Earth that we walk on. It’s about seeking to understand the cosmos.” He pauses to reflect for a moment. “I mean if you listen to Zulu music, it’s all about the stars.”

Selaocoe does this throughout our conversation – starts expansively, thinks widely and looks out at the world for answers. But he always returns to first principles, coming back to the idea that music is for connection, exchange and healing.

He was born in 1992, a year wedged between two moments of dramatic political possibility: February 1990, when Nelson Mandela was released after decades of imprisonment, and April 1994, when South Africans voted to end apartheid in historic elections that swept Mandela and his comrades to power.

While Selaocoe embodies the confidence and style of a new generation of South Africans, his focus on home and belonging, the rhythms of his improvisations and the often-haunting tone of

his voice are reminders that he is the product of a long and complex set of histories. The source of his artistry is embedded in the social DNA of his upbringing, but it doesn’t confine him. He uses his cello as a percussive instrument, throws his voice and calls upon dozens of musical traditions. When I ask how he has come to do this, he says it is because no one ever told him not to.

Selaocoe grew up in Sebokeng, a township about 60 kilometres south of Johannesburg in a family that was both religious and musical. By the time he was a teenager, his talent was apparent to everyone in his community. He was enrolled in a prestigious weekend music program in Soweto and soon was attending an elite boys’ school in one of the wealthiest neighbourhoods in South Africa.

To get to school or to his music lessons, Selaocoe often had to take the train. As he moved between locations, he developed a ritual he described in a profile in *The New York Times*, in which he would “remove the bridge of his cello, take off the endpin and put both parts in his pocket, standing with the instrument flat against his chest to take up as little space as possible”. The image is stark: a little boy with a big cello, making himself small.

Today Selaocoe is a global star, and he doesn’t need to worry about how much space he takes up. Indeed, he seems to be everywhere at once. In the weeks leading up to our interview he was in Manchester but on the day we spoke, his Tiny Desk Concert was released on NPR Music. As we hopped on the call, he was in Germany.

Reading the comments on his Instagram post in response to the digital concert, it’s hard to believe he’s a classical musician whose instrument is the cello. He has well over a 100,000 followers, many of whom have left breathless comments. Most are punctuated by love hearts and fire emojis. Someone writes “Broooooo!!!” Another comment reads: “One of the best concerts I’ve ever been to. It was like a spiritual experience.”

It’s the sort of enthusiasm that has followed him since his days as a student at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester. Two years into the program, Selaocoe formed Chesaba, a trio with Alan Keary on bass and Sidiki Dembélé on percussion (Dembélé will join the ACO concerts). Their performances included playing the kora and ngoni, and included songs sung in Bambara, Sotho, Tswana and Zulu. They also regularly collaborated with the seven-piece ensemble BCUC – Bantu Continua Uhuru Consciousness – to create concerts that throbbed with classical, hip-hop, Afrobeats and funk.

Some of the pride and excitement is about his African-ness. Though people from the African

diaspora have always played a role in Western classical music, and despite the gains made by musicians and artists such as Chi-chi Nwanoku, who founded the Chineke! Orchestra, the genre is still struggling to embrace Black musicians, composers and audiences.

When I ask Selaocoe if he ever experiences imposter syndrome, he reframes the question. It is no longer a question about race: instead he wants to talk about art and purpose. He insists that it's not so much about being an imposter as it is about feeling insecure, and insecurity is a feeling anyone can tap into. He says insecurity is valuable because it "forces you to ask yourself 'why do I feel out of place here?'".

He says that these days he is clear about this mission. "I've come to a place where I've decided that it's less about me and more about being a vessel for something universal, something powerful, something for people to hold onto. And when you think about it that way, it sort of takes away the fears."

I'm always interested in how people become who they are. I want to know how he learned to be brave. I begin by asking if he was intimidated by the cello as a child – its size, the oddness of the sounds it made in contrast to the other instruments he would have heard in church.

He throws the question back teasingly. "Imagine I'm an adult and I meet this thing. Then I would be intimidated. But as a child, you know, curiosity is something that seems to come first. You want to hold the thing, you want to see how it works, and so I was just more fascinated with how it worked at that age."

"I've come to a place where I've decided that it's less about me and more about being a vessel for something universal, something powerful, something for people to hold onto. And when you think about it that way, it sort of takes away the fears."

Fascination comes up often in our conversation. It's not just that the cello was fascinating, it's that it was made fascinating by those who loved him. "Everybody was around to teach me in music, and they made sure that fear was never part of the process," he says. "It was beautiful, that they said 'just explore', you know. 'Do you remember that hymn that we sing in church? Can you play it, can you find it?'".

This ethos – Do you remember it? Can you play it? Can you find it? – is at the core of Selaocoe's musicality. It's why his work extends beyond the aural, why critic for *The Observer* Kate Kellaway described attending an Abel Selaocoe concert as "medicine for the masses". He never lost the fascination that was cultivated in him as a child when he learned that "when you play music you never ask for permission". He is not interested in "whether I should be doing something or not". His audience, he says, understands that "when they come to this, when they come into the music, it's an active experience. It's about exploring and taking risks."

For Selaocoe, music is a resource. "[It's] like this mineral that I can show the audience, and it helps," he says. "It helps because I'm no different to them in that I am searching for a place to belong and to be cared for. And like them, I find it in music."

The risk-taking, the daring, the improvisation, the not knowing where each performance might go even as he holds fast to the technical skill and classicism that has put him on centre stage: all of these are in service of a larger artistic project that feels like an antidote for our times. His music is at once spiritual and humanistic. He is that rare musician who can dazzle those who believe in magic and impress those who are simply in love with the instrument.

Selaocoe is doggedly opposed to categorisation. His commitment to using his voice has drawn comparisons to American musician Bobby McFerrin, who also moves between genres and is comfortable using his voice in surprising and delightful ways. Both men carry their talent with an irresistible combination of purpose and joy.

"Not everyone can play an instrument, [but] most people have the ability to speak and use their own voices in some way," says Selaocoe. "And so, our voices are a tangible thread, a link between us and our ancestors – whether here in Germany; or in Australia, whether your ancestors or mine." Using your voice, he says, is a way of announcing your right to be part of a community. "It's the most natural thing that comes to all of us, whether you are shy or outspoken, you certainly belong when you sing."

As we near the end of our interview, Selaocoe describes himself as "a young man forever looking for

life, for ancestral connection". He says he often thinks about musicians such as trumpeter Hugh Masekela or Jonas Gwangwa, a trombonist who, like Masekela, played a seminal role in the fight against apartheid. They serve as a blueprint for what he does now.

"Being a child that came after, sometimes I wish I had been there too." His words are shot through with loneliness. There is a price to be paid for standing at the intersection of so many traditions: you become a category of one.

He insists on music as a site of connection. "Most people accept music," he says. "They will listen to it, even if it has nothing to do with their language or their culture." This belief animates his art, pulling him perpetually towards new audiences. With the fearlessness he had as a child, Selaocoe fills concert halls, insisting that his voice and his instrument give him permission to tell "difficult and beautiful stories".

I keep circling back to the image of the artist as a child, sitting on a train. As he travelled from the warmth of his family home in Sebokeng to the clamour of the classical music academy in Soweto and, later, to the quiet halls of his boarding school, Selaocoe tried to make himself smaller: but it wasn't because he was afraid.

I see now that Selaocoe was honouring the journeys of his fellow travellers. He recognised that, like him, the others on the train had important places to go. Even as a boy, he understood that to make the music that would carry him forward, he had to be humble enough to make space for others. ●

Sisonke Msimang is the author of two books, *Always Another country: a memoir of exile and home* and *The Resurrection of Winnie Mandela*, and has been widely published, including in *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *CNN* and *Al Jazeera*.

Abel Selaocoe's performances are generously supported by the Belalberi Foundation - Peter Crossing Family.

Page 14-15.
Abel Selaocoe.
Photo by Phil Sharp

Page 16.
Abel Selaocoe.
Photo by Phil Sharp

Below.
Abel Selaocoe.
Photo by Phil Sharp



Profound personal loss led composer
Nigel Westlake to think of music as a vessel
for love and human communication.

ONE WITH THE WORLD

Written by Eileen Chong



Nigel Westlake was born in 1958 into a musical family. His father, Donald Westlake, was principal clarinetist with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra (1961–1979), and his mother, Heather Westlake (nee Sumner) played the violin with several orchestras, including the Australian Chamber Orchestra in the 1980s. Westlake began his musical career as a clarinetist, leaving school at the age of 16 to pursue the study and performance of music. For four years, he studied intensively with his father, practising the clarinet eight hours a day.

“It changed the way I hear music. I moved from thinking about music as a science or as a tool, to a vessel for love, a path towards human connection.”

“When I was born, my father was playing with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, and I was in Perth with my mother,” Westlake tells me. “One of my earliest memories is hearing, through the bedroom wall, the sound of my mother practising the violin.” This commitment to music was present in their family life through rigorous practice schedules, and one Westlake continues to demonstrate in his professional life as not just a musician, but also as a conductor and composer. In 1983, he studied bass clarinet and composition in the Netherlands; a year later, he was appointed composer-in-residence for ABC Radio National. Notable films scored by Westlake include *Babe*, *Miss Potter*, *Antarctica* and *Blueback*.

In 2008, Westlake’s son, Eli, was killed at the age of 21. This tragedy affected Westlake’s life immensely. “The process of losing Eli changed so many things about the way I approached life,” he says. “We were surrounded by such an overwhelming outpouring of empathy from friends and family in our grief and it showed me the extent of people’s capacity for love. It changed the way I hear music. I moved from thinking about music as a science or as a tool, to a vessel for love, a path towards human connection.”

Ascension, the new work commissioned for the ACO, is a composition borne out of mourning,



“This music became a touchstone, representing a flight of the spirit, heralding the readiness for the soul to ascend. We played it at her funeral, and the work became even more significant this way.”

remembrance and love. Dedicated to the memory of Heather Westlake, who died just before Westlake received the commission, it takes inspiration from Vaughan Williams’ beloved *The Lark Ascending*, which was in turn influenced by the George Meredith poem of the same title.

“In her final days, my mother often requested *The Lark Ascending* to be played in her hospital room,” Westlake recalls. “Visitors would come and we would all sit around her bed, listening to the music. My mother had herself played this piece on the violin, and it was one of the final pieces of music we listened to together before her death at the age of 95. This music became a touchstone, representing a flight of the spirit, heralding the readiness for the soul to ascend.” He says it was played at her funeral, and became even more significant this way.

“Reflecting on Heather’s life and career during the composition process, I found myself revisiting the gentle warmth and skyward rising melodies of *The Lark Ascending*, secretly hoping some of its glorious magic might leave a faint fingerprint on the score,” he says. “When I started the writing process, my intention was never to quote from the music or the poem, but to try to capture and create a spiritual event within a sound world that would somehow enshrine and celebrate who my mother was. I wanted to bring her presence into being for the fleeting moment that the music was being played, to try to capture elements of her personality: her tenderness, her unconditional love, her sense of commitment to music and to life, her sweetness and warmth, her unforced nature and the gravitas of her personality.

“I had this list in front of me, and it was impossible to live up to it. Everything I wrote was never good enough. How could I possibly write music that encapsulated the magnitude of who she had been? Eventually I put the list away, replaced it with

a photograph of Mum, and tried to write a piece that reflected her relationship with music, that somehow brought her *to life* in music.

“I wanted to create something that could communicate, in a deceptively simple way, a sense of a life’s narrative, of a life’s unfolding. I wanted a kind of musical embrace present throughout, and for it to showcase my mother’s energy and vibrancy, even throughout times of struggle.”

Westlake speaks of an enduring memory of Heather, when she once said, “All music must be beautiful.” He often reflects on that moment and wonders what she meant. “For me, it’s about being emotionally honest, of being true to yourself, your art form and your audience. I think of *Ascension* as the musical equivalent of an incense ceremony, where the spirit is granted permission to rise, dissipate, and become one with the world.” ●

Eileen Chong is a Singapore-born Australian poet of Hakka, Hokkien and Peranakan descent. She is the author of 11 books. Her latest full-length poetry collection is *We Speak of Flowers* (UQP, 2025). She lives and works on unceded Gadigal land of the Eora Nation.

Page 21 & 22.
Nigel Westlake.
Photos by Simon Westlake

Abel Selaocoe

Director & Cello



South African cellist Abel Selaocoe has established himself as a leading voice of reimagining classical music. Redefining the parameters of the cello, he moves seamlessly across a plethora of genres and styles, from collaborations with world and jazz musicians, to concerto and solo performances. Selaocoe combines virtuosic performance with improvisation, singing and body percussion, and is devoted to composing works and curating programs that highlight the links between Western and non-Western musical traditions, broadening the horizons of classical music to reach a more diverse audience. In 2023 he was awarded the RPS Instrumentalist Award for his performances and collaborations which “blaze with creation, sending audiences home on a high”.

Selaocoe thrives in exploratory settings, developing new projects with contemporaries, and enjoys close collaborations with musicians from a medley of genres. In 2016, Selaocoe formed Chesaba – a trio specialising in music from the African continent, including many of his own compositions – and in 2022 formed the Bantu Ensemble who perform his music widely.

Selaocoe is Artistic Partner of The Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, Artist in Association with the BBC Singers and Artist in Residence with Kölner Philharmonie. In the 2024/25 season, he makes his debut at Verbier Festival with a solo recital and tours internationally with the Bantu Ensemble, including

the quartet’s debut performances at Carnegie Hall, La Jolla Music Society and Trondheim Chamber Music Festival.

Selaocoe continues to perform his solo cello concerto *Four Spirits* throughout 2024/25 with performances with the Orchestre Symphonique de Montreal and on a European tour with Aurora Orchestra. 2024/25 will also feature the world premieres of two works which Selaocoe will write for the Signum Quartet and The Hermes Experiment, who premiere the new works in October 2024 (Kölner Philharmonie) and November 2024 (Wigmore Hall) respectively.

Selaocoe completed his International Artist Diploma at the Royal Northern College of Music in July 2018. In May 2021, he was announced as an inaugural Power Up Music Creator participant in PRS Foundation’s new initiative to address anti-Black racism and racial disparities in the music sector and in July 2021, he received a Paul Hamlyn Foundation award for his compositional work.

Selaocoe plays a copy of a circa 1735 Montagnana, made by Robin Aitchison in 2020 with the generous support of the Alan Powell Trust.

Abel Selaocoe is an exclusive recording artist with Warner Classics.

Abel Selaocoe’s performances are generously supported by the Belalberi Foundation – Peter Crossing Family.

Sidiki Dembélé

Percussion



Sidiki Dembélé hails from an ancient line of Malian Griot musicians, diplomats and oral historians, raised in the cultural traditions of his ancestors. He is an accomplished multi-instrumentalist, beginning his professional career at the age of 14. Though he is a gifted multi-instrumentalist, his heart belongs to the djembe, a drum he describes as “a spiritual force, teaching us to live in peace, love, respect, humility, and tolerance.”

Now based in Manchester, UK, Dembélé’s remarkable journey has seen him perform with and compose for prestigious groups across the world, including the BBC Concert Orchestra, Welsh National Orchestra, the Royal Shakespeare Company and the Royal Ballet at the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden and he was named 21st-Century Drummers Ambassador in 2020. An international tour with the Manchester Collective culminated in a 2021 BBC Proms appearance, bringing together the music and traditions of two worlds and spaces in time. In 2022 Dembélé was both composer and Musical Director for an acclaimed production of Giles Terera’s *The Meaning of Zong*, which toured the UK for several months and at the close of the year he was featured in a CBeebies television series with the BBC Philharmonic, *A Musical Storyland*.

As a teacher, Dembélé offers immersive experiences in both his workshops and his annual trips to the Ivory Coast, sharing the depth and spirit of his music.

Timo-Veikko Valve

Principal Cello

Timo-Veikko Valve, affectionately known by audiences far and wide as 'Tipi', grew up in Finland, surrounded by a family who are "musically orientated normal people". Music lessons were a natural part of his upbringing, and at six years old, Tipi was encouraged to pick up the cello after a teacher at the local music school declared with considerable conviction that "he looks just like a cellist!". To this day, Tipi remains somewhat puzzled about what that statement actually meant. Whatever the subtext, the teacher seems to have been correct.

Tipi was appointed Principal Cello of the Australian Chamber Orchestra in 2006, and his leadership soon became an integral part of the ACO. Recognised for his natural, creative, and generous musicianship, Tipi seeks to define the modern-day musician. Prior to his Australian adventure, Tipi studied at the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki before continuing to the Edsberg Music Institute in Stockholm.

Tipi effortlessly transitions between modern and period instruments and describes the cello as a flexible and adaptive partner, both in its role in an ensemble and as a soloist, across all forms of music. He reflects this versatility and enjoys a diverse career as a musician, curator and director, directing from the cello and appearing as a soloist with many of the major orchestras across his two home countries, Finland, and Australia. Tipi is also a sought-after



collaborator and frequently appears as a chamber musician. His active commitment to the music of our times through curating and commissioning has seen him delivering world-premiere performances of multiple concertos and other significant works written especially for him.

Tipi plays on a Brothers Amati cello from 1616, kindly on loan from the ACO Instrument Fund.

Australian Chamber Orchestra



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Australian Chamber Orchestra

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The Australian Chamber Orchestra lives and breathes music, making waves around the world for its explosive performances that redefine orchestral music. With its fearless leader of 35 years, Artistic Director Richard Tognetti, in 2025 the Orchestra celebrates 50 years of invention, disruption and unforgettable music-making.

The ACO performs more than 100 concerts each year, with programs that embrace celebrated classics alongside new commissions and ground-breaking collaborations, working with artists and musicians who share the Orchestra’s ideology: from Emmanuel Pahud, Steven Isserlis, Patricia Kopatchinskaja, Pekka Kuusisto, Nicolas Altstaedt and William Barton, to Jonny Greenwood, Neil Finn and Meow Meow; to visual artists and film makers such as Bill Henson, Shaun Tan, Jane Campion, and Jennifer Peedom, who co-create unique, hybrid productions for which the ACO has become renowned.

The ACO has its own streaming platform, ACO On Demand, which hosts the Orchestra’s award-winning cinematic concert films, *ACO StudioCasts*, alongside live concert streams. The Orchestra also has an active recording program, with Richard Tognetti and the Orchestra winning eight ARIA Awards. Recent releases include *Water/Night Music*, the first Australian-produced classical vinyl for two decades, *Tchaikovsky/Shostakovich* and ARIA award-winning albums *River* and *Indies & Idols*.

In 2022 the ACO opened a new, world-class venue, ACO On The Pier, continuing the Orchestra’s dedication to creating and presenting transformative experiences for all music lovers.



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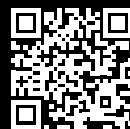
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ACO Subscriber Stories

Norma Disher Hawkins

Sydneysider Norma Disher Hawkins reveals her favourite ACO concert, why her love of live music has endured and her first impressions of Richard Tognetti.

“I have to remind myself that I am 102-going-on-103. Do I still want to be alive? Yes I do!”

And what the oldest-known Australian Chamber Orchestra subscriber, Norma Disher Hawkins, lives for is *music*.

She has been an ACO subscriber for 45 years, since 1980, and remembers the time of John Harding and Carl Pini leading the Orchestra. She also remembers when, in 1990, a young Richard Tognetti took over at the helm.

“I remember the first time we saw Richard,” Norma says with a fond chuckle. “We were sitting parallel with the stage, and he came out with a dark suit on, with loose, baggy pants, and boots. He had fair hair, and a little diamond stud in his ear.”

Richard brought something very different to the stage from previous leaders of the ACO.

“We were a bit startled,” Norma says. “It was definitely a change from Carl Pini! But when he started to play... well, blimey! I mean, it was *exciting*.”

Norma, who lives in her own home in Sydney, has an irrepressible passion for music. When she was just 15, she would save up five shillings a week to attend ABC Orchestra performances at the Sydney Town Hall. She queued outside the Town Hall from 5pm on the dot, waiting for the chance to file through and rush for an empty seat on the side of the stage, listening from as close to the orchestra as possible.

When she got married at the age of 55, her husband, Bruce, shared her love of music. They



subscribed to several orchestras and were “saturated with music,” to use Norma’s words.

“When my husband died in 1998 I kept our two ACO seats going, and I always took somebody with me,” she says. “I wanted to share the music.”

For Norma, music is for everybody.

“So many people say to me, ‘I don’t understand the music’,” she says. “But you don’t have to understand it. You just have to let it come and sweep over you.

“Listen to it and you’ll find a tune, and then concentrate on that tune, and you’ll hear variations of it. And it’s exciting, you know?”

After so many years subscribing to the ACO, it’s of course difficult for Norma to pick one favourite concert. But one does stand out, and it brings tears to Norma’s eyes as she thinks about it:

“I do think the concert Richard devised for the celebration of Anzac Day, *Reflections on Gallipoli*, was inspired. *The Lark Ascending* sequence where he had the photographs, the series of close ups of young men from Turkey and from Australia, showing young soldiers whose eyes told us they were frightened, was incredibly powerful.”

Age: 102

Subscriber for: 45 Years

Date of first ACO concert: 1980

Favourite ACO concert:

***Reflections on Gallipoli* (2015)**

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