



THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY

—
Sydney
Conservatorium
of Music

*musique
courante*

Intricate Mechanisms

Works for Chamber Ensemble

Conducted by Ben Perche

About the Music

The works we will be performing today are an eclectic collection of modern works for large chamber ensemble, all of which are very rarely performed in Sydney. The four works span the globe and the last century, and all sound totally unique and contemporary. Today's ensemble features a full complement of wind, string and brass soloists, alongside a battery of percussion. However, more unusually the ensemble also features the sounds of electric guitar, harpsichord, celeste, and accordion.

All the pieces performed today relate in some way to an idea of intricate mechanisms - these are not overtly expressive works, but music that has been written with precision, and some kind of mechanical drive.

The program opens with a dash of contemporary minimalism from Nico Muhly, laced with intricate and interweaving patterns.

We then enter the mysterious and fascinating sound world of Ligeti's Chamber Concerto. An extremely complex and challenging piece, Ligeti's precise musical language demands virtuosity from every player, but the result is a unique sonic atmosphere that is sure to leave you intrigued.

In stark contrast, Village Idiot by Elena Kats-Chernin is a romp, full of driving energy and liveliness.

We will finish our program with some classic Hindemith, full of humour in his signature matter-of-fact style, and ending (of course) with an air raid siren.

I am very excited to have the opportunity to present this mixture of pieces today, and I am very grateful to the musicians who have helped bring these pieces to life. Thank you for coming to this evening's concert, and I hope to see you again at future performances.

Ben Perche

Program

7pm, 21 February 2026
Music Workshop
Sydney Conservatorium of Music

Nico Muhly
(born 1981)

In As Long As It Takes (2017)

György Ligeti
(1923-2006)

Kammerkonzert für 13 Instrumentalisten
(Chamber Concerto for 13 Instrumentalists) (1970)

- I. Corrente
- II. Calmo, sostenuto
- III. Movimento preciso e meccanico

Elena Kats-Chernin AO
(born 1957)

Village Idiot (2006)

Paul Hindemith
(1895-1963)

Kammermusik No. 1, op. 24/1 (Chamber Music No. 1)
(1922)

- I. Sehr schnell und wild (Very fast and wild)
- II. Mäßig schnelle (Moderately Fast)
- III. Quartett
- IV. Finale 1921

Program Notes

In As Long As It Takes by Nico Muhly

Written in Muhly's typical post-minimalist style, intricate patterns of staccato pops are woven around a crystalline, twinkling and sliding keyboard part. *In As Long As It Takes* was written for the Irish New Music group Crash Ensemble in 2017.



Image: <https://nicomuhly.com/biography/>

Nico Muhly is one of this generation's leading American composers, currently based in New York City. Once an assistant to Philip Glass, he completed a Masters degree at Juilliard. In addition to work with major arts companies, he has worked with pop artists such as Sufjan Stevens. A prolific composer, Muhly's recent commissions have included two operas for the Metropolitan Opera in New York, and works for Sydney's Omega Ensemble, Australian Chamber Orchestra and Sydney Chamber Opera.

Chamber Concerto for 13 Instrumentalists by György Ligeti

Hailed as "the saviour of modern music," Ligeti's music came to prominence when (without permission) Stanley Kubrick used it in his film *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The Chamber Concerto was written shortly after the release of this film, and represents a culmination of Ligeti's compositional techniques and style up to the period of its composition in 1970. A virtuosic work for the whole ensemble, it is full of totally unique textures where the ensemble sound 'fuses together', alternating with periods emphasising the individuality of the unusual combination of instruments. The piece is based on different chromatic clusters of notes, all animated by Ligeti's signature technique of 'micropolyphony', with each movement exploring this technique in a different way. Today we will be presenting the first three out of the four movements of the piece.

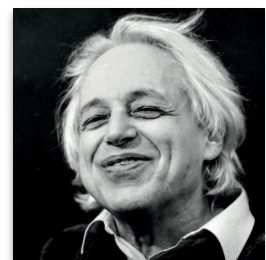


Image: <https://limelight-arts.com.au/features/composer-of-the-month-gyorgy-ligeti/>

Ligeti described his ideas for the **first movement** of the piece as 'the surface of a stretch of water, where everything takes place below the surface.' The movement opens with a distilled representation of micropolyphony, with each instrument exploring the notes of a chromatic cluster in canon, with pitches appearing in a defined order but with alternating rhythms so each part moves through the canon at an independent speed. The effect is that one loses track of the individual instrumental voices, and instead hears simply an undulating mass of sound, whose

tone colour gradually morphs as the lines are passed between instruments. Ligeti then very slowly and carefully changes the notes used, gradually moving and compressing the cluster down until all that is left is a single note, heard in unison near the mid-point of the movement. After a period of stillness, there is a joint cry from the woodwinds which outlines a new cluster. This cluster then tears itself apart in a span of frenetic activity before evaporating into nothingness.

The **second movement** alternates between moments of tranquillity and moments of oscillation. After a still and glassy opening, Ligeti experiments with a new technique of independent tempi: the conductor sets a separate tempo for each individual instrument, who then maintain this speed for their meandering line as other instruments are added at different tempi. A melodic line is then shared between the horn, trombone and oboe d'amore, an unusual instrument halfway between an oboe and cor anglais very rarely used since the baroque era. After a second period of calm is a section of furious intensity, with almost all instruments playing loud dissonances in tight rhythmic alignment. This energy very gradually dissipates as the music collapses into a unison G.

The **third movement** then is a mix of order and chaos in Ligeti's 'meccanico' style, where the blurry, amorphous shapes of the first movements are replaced by sharp edges and precise action. The wind and brass instruments start the movement with extremely fast repeated notes, almost machine-like, which are gradually clouded through the addition of different pitches. This then leads immediately into an extraordinary cloud of repeated A flats, which slowly morphs as it is overtaken by repeated rhythmic patterns and polyrhythms, like cogs turning in a huge and unknowable machine. Suddenly, it is as if the machine breaks, and over trembling woodwinds we hear spikes and hard attacks, with the conductor continuing to beat in silence.

György Ligeti was an eternally curious man, always moving on to the next thing. He could speak enthusiastically about renaissance polyphony, the symphonies of Mahler, and the intricacies of electronic music. He was born in Hungary in 1923, and lost two close family members in the Holocaust, surviving only with his mother. He spent his education and early career in repressive communist Hungary, escaping to the West in 1956. From this period on, he spent much time in Vienna, Cologne and Hamburg, and in the 1960s was part of the influential avant-garde in Darmstadt along with other influential composers such as Karlheinz Stockhausen and Pierre Boulez. He was very aware of the prevailing trends and movements of contemporary music, but always a unique compositional voice.

Village Idiot by Elena Kats-Chernin

Village Idiot was inspired by a poem by the same name by Graeme Doyle which Kats-Chernin heard him recite. Doyle was an Australian multidisciplinary artist who experienced schizophrenia and bipolar disorder for his entire life. The poem describes the feeling of exclusion as experienced by a 'village idiot.' The work was commissioned and premiered by *Present Music*, a new music ensemble from Milwaukee, Wisconsin.



Image: <https://www.cinqueartistmanagement.com/our-artists/elena-kats-chernin/>

The music is mostly built on an energetic and motoric 10/8 ostinato and an 8-bar pattern. The work constantly evolves while maintaining its forward momentum. The unique sound of the work mostly comes from its unusual instrumentation, including accordion, electric guitar and harpsichord (played on an electric keyboard). A sparse opening gradually builds in texture, with the electric guitar playing the role of the 'village idiot'. In the middle section, the 8-bar pattern stretches into a slow-moving sequence of string chords, yearning but never quite achieving release. A plaintive trumpet solo breaks the cycle, but the piece then gets stuck in an uncertain loop, constantly stopping and starting as it tries to break out of its pattern. Finally, the guitar and temple blocks break us out into a return of the opening material. In the final section, the momentum disappears and the music begins to disintegrate. We are left with a searching theme, first heard in the trombone, and which finishes in the perplexed guitar.

The piece has since been reworked a number of times into other works for varied instrumentation under the title 'Fast Blue Village,' however this original version is rarely performed.

Elena Kats-Chernin AO is one of Australia's most successful and popular composers. Kats-Chernin was born in Uzbekistan in 1957, and immigrated to Australia in 1975. She studied at the New South Wales Conservatorium of Music, and also studied in Germany. She has produced works for 'nearly every genre' of music, from commissions for all of Australia's orchestras, to operas and ballets. Many of her pieces have become widely known through frequent performances and use in advertisements, and her music has won a number of major awards.

Kammermusik No. 1 by Paul Hindemith

Kammermusik No. 1 was an early work by Hindemith, and one of his first successful pieces. Kammermusik No. 1 was written for a chamber music festival in Donaueschingen. There were reports of a small riot at one of the early

performances of the work in 1923, just a few years after the infamous riot at the premiere of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*. Reportedly, Hindemith "had disappeared backstage with the other musicians. As the spectacle reached its height, he reappeared - thoroughly calm - seated himself at the percussion... beat with all his might on the drums, and let the slide whistle howl." Hindemith reflected on this later in his life:



Image: <http://www.classical.net/music/comp.lst/hindemith.php>

"One wonders why people made such a fuss about his piece at the time. It is not at all badly written, and there is nothing, apart from a few harmonic and melodic teething troubles, to upset innocent souls. It is not exactly refined, and the extravagant use of percussion, etc., was certainly a concession to the prevailing (lack of) taste at that time."

The percussion writing is certainly extravagant for the time, the single percussionist rapidly jumping between nine different instruments, most notably a wind-up air raid siren which is heard at the end of the piece.

The piece is in four movements. The first is energetic and wild; the short movement alternates between a section with a wind, cello and accordion melody over intricately entangled strings and piano, with the second featuring a twisting melody in the xylophone. The second movement is written in a very practical and matter-of-fact style, in a kind of rondo form, and almost like a march. The third is a pastoral slow movement for the three woodwind instruments and a single note on the glockenspiel. The finale is turbulent as well as being episodic. Each tempestuous section is interrupted by shocks of triplets in the piano and snare drum, but the music keeps picking itself up and suddenly changing tack to the following section. Sections include wheeling strings under a lurching woodwind melody, a flowing piano solo, and a quotation of a popular 'Foxtrot' dance from the time of its composition played by the trumpet over unruly scales in the rest of the ensemble.

Paul Hindemith was a significant modernist composer from the early twentieth century. Born in Germany, he started music lessons at an early age, and was a recognised virtuoso on the viola and viola d'amore. He became particularly linked with the concept of '*Gebrauchsmusik*', or 'Music for Use', writing many works for instruments without a large repertoire, music for amateurs and music for specific occasions. With his established harmonic language, he was a fast writer and could quickly compose new works in his own distinctive style. Hindemith wrote a number of influential textbooks on harmony and composition, and taught at Yale for a number of years after WWII.

Ben Perche

Ben is a new generation conductor passionate about new music and music education.

Ben has directed and organised ambitious performances, including Steve Reich's *Drumming* with students from Eastern Michigan University in Ypsilanti (Michigan) in 2025, and musicals such as *Legally Blonde* with Pennant Hills High School. As part of his work with the Northern Sydney Symphonic Wind Ensemble (NSSWE), Ben spearheaded an international Wind Ensemble Gala concert featuring the esteemed Tokyo Takanawadai Wind Orchestra at The Concourse in Chatswood. Most recently, he served as an assistant conductor for the combined NIDA and Conservatorium Opera production of Offenbach's *Orpheus in the Underworld* in 2025. Ben is the Music Director and Conductor of *Musique Courante*, a new project ensemble dedicated to performing underplayed works from the 20th and 21st centuries.



He has worked extensively as a conductor and administrator with primary and high school bands and orchestras across Sydney's North Shore and Northern Beaches. His experience includes work with music extension programs such as the NSSWE and The Arts Unit initiatives within the Department of Education. He also authored a free 'Band Program Administration Handbook' to help new administrators and parent committees run effective school programs, and serves on the committee of the Australian Band and Orchestra Directors Association (NSW).

He holds bachelor's degrees in music (oboe and conducting) from the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, and engineering (mechatronics) from the University of Sydney, as well as an AMusA from the AMEB in oboe. He developed his conducting skills through programs delivered by ABODA, Melbourne Youth Orchestra, Ensemble Offspring, and the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra. As an oboist, Ben plays in numerous semi-professional and community ensembles across Sydney and the Central Coast, as well as in the pit with local musical theatre productions. Ben has been mentored by conductors including Steve Williams, John Lynch, Elizabeth Scott, Patrick Brennan, Brett Weymark, Rob McWilliams, Brett Kelly, Paula Crider and Roger Benedict,. After a year of postgraduate study in the United States under Dr Mary Schneider, Ben is now completing a Masters of Music Studies in Conducting at the Sydney Conservatorium with Ben Northey.

Musique Courante

Conductor: Ben Perche

musique
courante

Flute / Piccolo

Jenny Ridgway †

Oboe / Oboe d'Amore / Cor Anglais

Edward Wang †

Clarinet 1

Tess Darby *

Clarinet 2 / Bass Clarinet

Paris Chen *

Bassoon

Lyndon Coward *

Trumpet

Amy Fox †

Horn

Kaitlyn Philips †

Trombone

Josh De Haan *

Percussion

Ben Weatherall *

Valdas Cameron *

Violin 1

Miranda Ilchef *

Violin 2

Sam Jenkin *

Viola

Joseph O'Reilly *

Cello

Karen Cortez †

Double Bass

Paignthor Acevedo-Martin *

Piano / Celesta

Jacob Wu *

Harpsichord / Hammond Organ

Riley Irwin †

Accordion

Elizabeth Jones †

Electric Guitar

Aaron Bonduriansky *

* SCM Students

† SCM Alumni