

Piano works by Keith Humble, Helen Gifford, Margaret Boland,
Tom Henry, Mark Pollard, Warren Burt and Lawrence Whiffin

Astra 60

Six decades of
Australian piano
music originally
performed at
Astra Music Society
concerts



Keith Humble

Sonata No. 1 (1959)

- 1 I. At a fair speed, but not percussively so 1'23"
- 2 II. Scherzando -Adagio molto 2'18"

Helen Gifford

Three Pieces (1966)

- 3 Cantillation Fluente 2'14"
- 4 The Spell Con enfasi delicato 2'23"
- 5 Waltz Capriccioso 1'23"

Warren Burt

6 In Memoriam Carl Ruggles: Aardvarks II:

Mr Natural encounters Flakey Front! (1971) 5'07"

Mark Pollard

Krebs (1983)

- 7 I. 2'03"
- 8 II. 2'53"
- 9 III. 1'33"

Marguerite Boland

Two Miniatures (1994)

- 10 Light and detached 1'25"
- 11 Espressivo 2'44"

Tom Henry

Piano Sonata (2006)

- 12 Theme 1'34"
- 13 Variations 5'34"
- 14 Moto perpetuo 6'58"

Lawrence Whiffin

Piano Sonata No.3 (2011)

- 15 I. 6'42"
- 16 II. 9'16"

This CD captures a concert of Australian piano music given in celebration of Astra's 60 years of supporting Australian music and artists. The Astra Chamber Music Society presents new Australian music and Australian performers within a context of international new music developments, always informed by intriguing cultural perspectives. The following notes written by John McCaughey, Astra's visionary and inspiring Artistic Director, describe the connections and influences in this program of piano music especially selected to reflect Astra's unusual ethos and presentation. This CD is a compilation of the actual live concert recordings (28 and 29 May 2011) and studio recordings.

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Into the seventh decade ...

In celebration of Astra's 60 years, this program represents each of the decades since the 1950s with an array of six piano works – a guard of welcome to Lawrence Whiffin's *Piano Sonata No.3* in its first performance, composed for Michael Kieran Harvey in 2010, the composer's eightieth year.

The seven composers of the program are linked in a web of musical and personal ties, through their multiple contributions to Astra concerts, their relations to the performer, and their connections with Lawrence Whiffin and with the former Music Department at La Trobe University, where he spent a substantial part of his life as teacher.

At the same time, the works show a spectrum of changing times in the wider musical world. The sonata with its discursive tradition is heard in three different guises, as a frame around other approaches to sound and form in the other three pieces – the piano as vehicle for individual or aphoristic utterances, or for more continuous, monolithic energies.

Keith Humble

Sonata No.1 (1959)

- 1 *I. At a fair speed, but not percussively so*
- 2 *II. Scherzando*
--*Adagio molto*

Keith Humble was Lawrence Whiffin's older colleague, first at the Melbourne University Conservatorium in the 1940s, then in Paris as student, later assistant of composer-conductor Rene Leibowitz, the most important teacher of the Schoenberg school in the post-war years in Europe. Humble's brief and condensed *Piano Sonata No.1* was a work of special importance for him, written in 1959 for his own instrument after two years of creative pause and material difficulty in Paris. It was started during a concert tour as pianist in Germany and encapsulates his earlier studies with Leibowitz infused with his own personality –

techniques of Schoenberg combined with the gestural playfulness of Haydn and the contracted forms of Liszt. The sonata was premiered some years later by pianist Roger Holmes at the first concert of the Melbourne ISCM branch in 1965.



Helen Gifford

Three Pieces (1966)

- 3 Cantillation Fluente
- 4 The Spell Con enfasi delicato
- 5 Waltz Capriccioso

Like both Humble and Whiffin, but in the following decade, Helen Gifford graduated in piano, as a student of the French-trained Roy Shepherd at the Conservatorium – composition studies being unavailable in



Melbourne at the time. Her independent and distinctive path in Australian music was already being marked out by the 1960s, initially with a significant place for piano works; her

Piano Sonata and *Catalysis* preceded the *Three Pieces* of this program, before she moved on to her more natural terrain of voice, interaction with poetry, and refined use of percussion textures – familiar aspects of her music to Astra audiences. Some of these later qualities are already suggested in the distinct perceptual mode

of each title – *Cantillation*, *Spell* and *Waltz* being, in her words, ‘emotionally distanced’ from their source of inspiration as she explored her own form of abstract character pieces. *Three Pieces* was first performed by Sally Mays, who returns to Australia to record Gifford’s latest set of piano pieces, two of which – *Presentiment* and *Obsession* – were given individual premieres by Kim Bastin and Joan Pollock at an Astra concert in 2005.

Warren Burt

6 In Memoriam Carl Ruggles: Aardvarks II: Mr Natural encounters Flakey Front! (1971)

Warren Burt first came to Australia in 1975 as part of a remarkable injection of international talent at Keith Humble’s new Music Department at La Trobe, and has sustained a vast range of activities here ever since, including electronic, micro-tonal and environmental music projects and frequent returns to the USA and Europe. His piano work *Aardvarks II* was composed when he was still a graduate student in San Diego, and is described by him:

‘*Aardvarks II* (*Mr. Natural Encounters Flakey Foont*’) (1971) was written for Keith Humble in the northern autumn of 1971 as part of the Composers’ Seminar at the



University of California, San Diego. All of the incoming post-grad composers were asked to write a fully notated piece and have it performed that term. I already knew Keith from his visits to the State University of New York at Albany, so I asked him if he wanted an energetic virtuoso piano piece. To my relief, he said yes. I was intrigued at the time with ideas of dissonant counterpoint, and progressions that avoided the use of major or minor thirds. I was also interested in tempi that accelerated and decelerated. Under the guidance of Robert Erickson, this was the piece that was produced. Keith did indeed play it, people liked it; I revised it slightly in 1973 when it was published by Kenneth Gaburo’s Lingua Press, and years later, it still provides a nicely energetic sound experience for audiences, and the promised workout for the performer.’



Mark Pollard

Krebs (1983)

- 7 I.
- 8 II.
- 9 III.

Mark Pollard is the long-standing head of composition studies at the Victorian College of the Arts, where he has established a strong tradition of energetic composers with an eclectic range of skills. His own musical output has embraced a wide range of styles and genres. He wrote a large piano sonata for Michael Kreran Harvey in 2005, but the piece *Krebs* comes from an earlier period, during his postgraduate studies at La Trobe,

where he was engaged with the American post-Schoenberg school of Donald Martino and others. It was published in a volume from La Trobe University Press, *Contemporary Australian Piano*, edited by Lawrence Whiffin and Haydn Reeder. Pollard regards the piece from a present-day perspective: '*Krebs* is about drama and the ritual of performance. It is a series of contrasting sound snapshots that illuminate the piano as a percussion instrument. Over the past 25 years my music has been informed by many diverse

music styles and languages; however, the aspects of sound imagery and performance ritual explored in *Krebs* have remained a recurring source of inspiration.'

Marguerite Boland

Two Miniatures (1994)

- 10 Light and detached
- 11 Espressivo

Marguerite Boland combines the roles of composer and musicologist in Canberra at the Australian National University. She is the initiator and co-editor of a forthcoming book from Cambridge University Press on the music of Elliott Carter, which will draw a wider cultural and international

perspective on his music. Her *Two Miniatures* come from an earlier period of studies at La Trobe where her teachers included Lawrence Whiffin. They were performed by Madeleine Flynn for Astra, and more recently in 2010 at the Juilliard School in New York by Edward Neeman.

Boland writes: 'These *Two Miniatures* make connections with some of the music that influenced me during my time at the La Trobe Music Department (1991-1999). The first miniature started out as an exercise in motivic row partitioning for Laurie Whiffin's composition class. Its Webernesque character is complemented in the second

miniature by a more Schoenbergian expressionism fueled by my first contact with his Ops. 11 and 23 piano works. Miniature two also unfolds a series of Elliott Carter-style metric modulations that lead the music through brief explorations of different registers of the piano.'



Tom Henry

Piano Sonata (2006)

12 Theme

Quasi recitativo: molto drammatico, con rubato

13 Variations

1. *Poco agitato*
2. *Molto tranquillo e rubato*
3. *Molto calmo e ritmato*
(quasi una Habanera)
4. *Poco agitato*
5. *Quasi recitativo, con rubato*
6. *Poco giocoso*
7. *Violente*
8. *Maestoso*
9. *Poco giocoso*
10. –

14 Moto perpetuo

Hesitant at first, then flowing

Tom Henry engaged in intensive private studies in composition with Lawrence Whiffin after establishing an advanced career as flautist, where his international teachers included William Bennett and Aurele Nicolet. His *Piano Sonata* was written for Michael Kieran Harvey, and is premiered here. Henry writes: 'The *Piano Sonata* was begun during a very short but creative period, the very hot summer of 2005-2006 (as I recall), which followed my years of study with the composer Lawrence



Whiffin. Like the other works begun during this period (a Song Cycle on Rilke's *The Book of Images*, and *Passage for Strings*), the *Piano Sonata* was an intense and innate musical response to one aspect of the European classical musical tradition that I had studied during those years. Each work seemed to arise unannounced, like a dream. My musical responses in the other works were lyrical and passionate, but those in the *Piano Sonata* (which was my response to the Second Viennese School and its later disciples) arose like implacable, black granite, full of a dark,

painful tension. The work seems to me now to be an unconscious attempt to flee the confines of serialism, with its inner rigour that is in turns seductive and confining to a composer; the three movements reflect a gradual progression towards a more tonal utterance, eventually giving way to waves of emotion, like grief.'

Lawrence Whiffin

Piano Sonata No.3 (2011)

15 I.

Lento – Scherzando – Vivo – Lent

16 II.

(A) *Languido*

(B) *Double tempo*

(A) *Con moto*

(B) *Double tempo*

(A) *Turbolente*

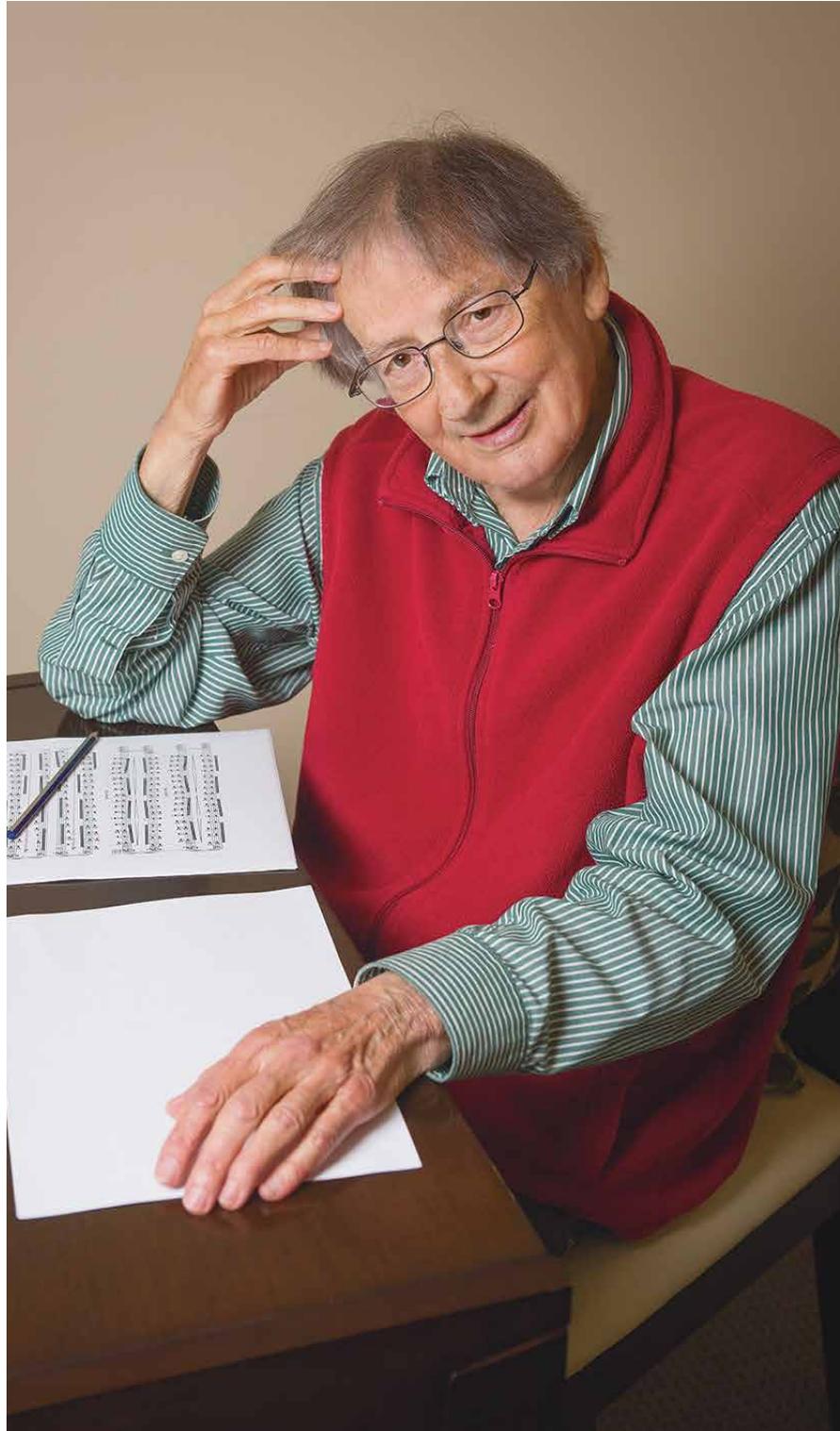
(C) *Maestoso*

(D) *Allegro pazzesco*

(A) *Languido*

(E) *Finale: Vivo – Maestoso – Fade*

A student of Rene Leibovitz in Paris in the 1950s, Lawrence Whiffin spent many years in France and Italy before returning to join the staff at La Trobe in the 1970s. Following his *Sonata No. 1* (1961/2006) and *Sonata No.2: Mechanical Mirrors* (1999), both performed by Michael Kieran Harvey at Astra concerts, today's new sonata is his first 21st-century one, possibly mirroring the more diffuse musical era with its personal qualities and multiple materials. Whiffin himself writes: 'The third piano sonata shares a common feature with both the first and second sonatas – all three have two main sections or movements divided by a pause. Otherwise, the third sonata differs radically from the first two in that the language, though still non-tonal, makes little use of serialism and



leans instead on external factors such as imitations of wedding bells and the citation of a well-known 19th century French comic opera galop. The exposition of the first movement is in traditional sonata form – introduction, first subject, transition to a group of second subjects, and a coda based on earlier elements. However, the development of the first movement is delayed, absorbed into the second movement where, following several alternating slow and fast moving sections, it is activated in a potpourri of scatterbrained flashbacks then finally killed off by flurries of bells gradually fading, as in a pop song – but Big Ben cannot be denied.'

Michael Kieran Harvey

Michael Kieran Harvey has given around 20 concerts in the Astra series since 1990, extending from a wide range of solo works to a recent Concertino with chamber orchestra written for him by Martin Friedel,



and duo recitals with performers such as Miwako Abe and Mardi McCullea. In his third Astra appearance in 1991 he premiered the *First Sonata* by Carl Vine, which he made into an international sensation two years later, winning the Grand Prix at the inaugural Ivo Pogorelic competition in the USA. While maintaining international performances, he has opted to remain in Australia, where he plays vastly more repertoire in any one year than is required of most of his northern hemisphere colleagues, and has given unequalled support to composers of all ages and stages. With Martin Wright at Move Records he has steadily produced a substantial anthology of solo CDs, titled the Michael Kieran Harvey Collection, embracing music from many Australian and international contemporary composers.

– JMcC

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