

# Distortions & Vibrations: WAKS PLAYS HINDSON

**Nathan Waks will be playing Matthew Hindson's new work, *Concerto for Amplified Cello and Orchestra*, with the Sydney Symphony this month. ANNAROSA REYNEKE caught up with him at the Opera House one Thursday afternoon.**

When cellist Nathan Waks sits down to perform Matthew Hindson's *Concerto for Amplified Cello and Orchestra* with the Sydney Symphony this month, it will be like sitting down to a conversation with an old friend.

Waks has been working on the concerto with Hindson since July last year, and by November 2000 it was only awaiting a few finishing touches.

His interaction with the composer was primarily technical. 'It is not a performer's job to tell a composer how to compose,' Waks says. 'My job has been to run Matthew through a range of the instrument's technical possibilities. Some of the things I showed him he used, some he didn't.'

Waks also pointed out passages that created difficulty for the soloist and showed Hindson how the effect he was trying to create could be achieved in a different way.

Such collaboration between composer and soloist ensures that the effort expended on playing a work is rewarded by the way it sounds. 'Many works are not "grateful to play" in this way,' Waks says. 'But if they'd been written by a great composer who's dead, there's not much you can do about it. Had the composer been alive, however, you would have discussed it with him.'

Of course, in the end the soloist will play what the composer wants. 'But Matthew is a clever young man and he instinctively understood where I was coming from. Both of us want the concerto to be performed more than once.'

A piece Peter Sculthorpe wrote for Waks years ago was subsequently performed by many artists. 'But Peter and I worked on it extensively before it was recorded and published; I think it's the duty of the performer to stay involved - everyone gets better results that way.'

The Hindson concerto came into being because the Sydney Symphony wanted

Waks to play a work for solo cello and orchestra. He preferred to play a new piece.

'Play Dvorák or Elgar and the world's finest cellists will have already done so, plus made recordings,' he says. 'Which means not only do you have to play it perfectly, but you have to find a way of doing so in an original way.'

'With a new piece, on the other hand, whatever you do will be seen as the way it should sound and you'll forever be associated with that performance.'

Hindson, as composer in residence with the Sydney Symphony in 1999, was the appropriate person to compose it.

Amplification was Waks's idea. 'In its purest form, of course amplification just makes the cello louder,' he explains. 'But that's not the sole purpose here. Matthew's work lends itself very well to manipulation of sound, as he has a background in computers and technological music.'

The concerto thus incorporates the modulations, distortions and vibrations found in electronic music. 'Pretty standard in non-classical music but new in this context,' Waks laughs.

A secondary reason for the amplification is the acoustics in the Opera House concert hall which, in Waks's view, are 'extremely ungrateful to solo instruments'.

'It's always a struggle for the soloist to come through. With amplification, Matthew could write for a big percussion and a loud brass section without worrying about drowning me out.'

Waks did not choose the cello so much as it chose him, he says. Having started piano lessons when he was very young, by age seven he was ready to throw in the towel. 'The piano and I never really hit it off,' he remembers. 'My mother - a pianist - didn't want me to give up music that soon, and as I had an older brother whom she'd convinced to take up the violin, she

thought a cellist would complete the trio.'

It was a successful match - Waks liked the sound of the instrument and, as a little boy, the size. 'We've had our moments of not seeing eye to eye, the cello and I, but I keep coming back to it,' he says.

Having studied at the conservatorium with Lois Simpson (cello) and Robert Pikler (chamber music), at age 17 he left for Russia to study with Mstislav Rostropovich.

It was 1968, at the height of the Vietnam War, and the excursion had been organised by the Borodin String Quartet, subject to Rostropovich being happy to take Waks on as a pupil.

'He was happy and we had lessons, but the Russian government would not let me stay,' he remembers. 'After a month I had a meeting with the cultural minister and she told me the only way it would be allowed was on a cultural exchange basis. But what Russian musician would have wanted to come to Australia in 1968? And in the political climate of the time, what Russian musician would have been allowed to?'

So he went off to Paris instead. In his short time with Rostropovich, however, he learnt two valuable lessons: discipline and the ability to play softly yet with absolute clarity and projection.

In Paris he spent a year with Paul Tortelier. 'He was always experimenting. He taught me there were many ways to achieve a satisfactory outcome to a musical or technical challenge. Many of Tortelier's students had problems coping with the myriad of ideas he showered on them. I found I got a lot out of it. He was the ultimate lateral cellist.'

Back home, at age 19 Waks became the Sydney Symphony's youngest ever principal cellist. Since then he has performed with all the major Australian orchestras.

Along the way, he gave up the cello several times.

'The first time was when my two children

were very young and I wanted to spend more time with them,' he remembers. It was the mid-80s, he'd been playing for the Sydney String Quartet for a decade and it was an all-consuming career. 'We worked extremely hard and did a lot of touring. There wasn't much time for anything else. I wanted to be a father, so I gave up playing at that level. I haven't regretted it for a minute.'

Waks always had diverse musical interests. In the 70s, while pursuing a career as soloist, he also organised festivals, helped found the Australian Music Centre and the Australian Chamber Orchestra, and organised string sections for artists like Frank Sinatra and Rod Stewart. By the 80s he'd also written soundtracks for several films, including *My Brilliant Career* and *Kangaroo*.

From the mid-80s to the 90s he enjoyed a diverse career, including record production and consultancy and performance for various festivals.

In 1993 he was appointed managing director of Symphony Australia, a position he held for six years. An important part of the job was to attend concerts.

'This was new to me! Until then I hadn't attended many concerts as a spectator as I was usually on the stage performing. I started thinking it would be nice to be up there with the musicians again. Soon after, the Sydney Symphony asked me to fill in for its principal cellist – Katie Hewgill – who was having a baby, and the next thing I knew I was back in the orchestra. That was three years ago.'

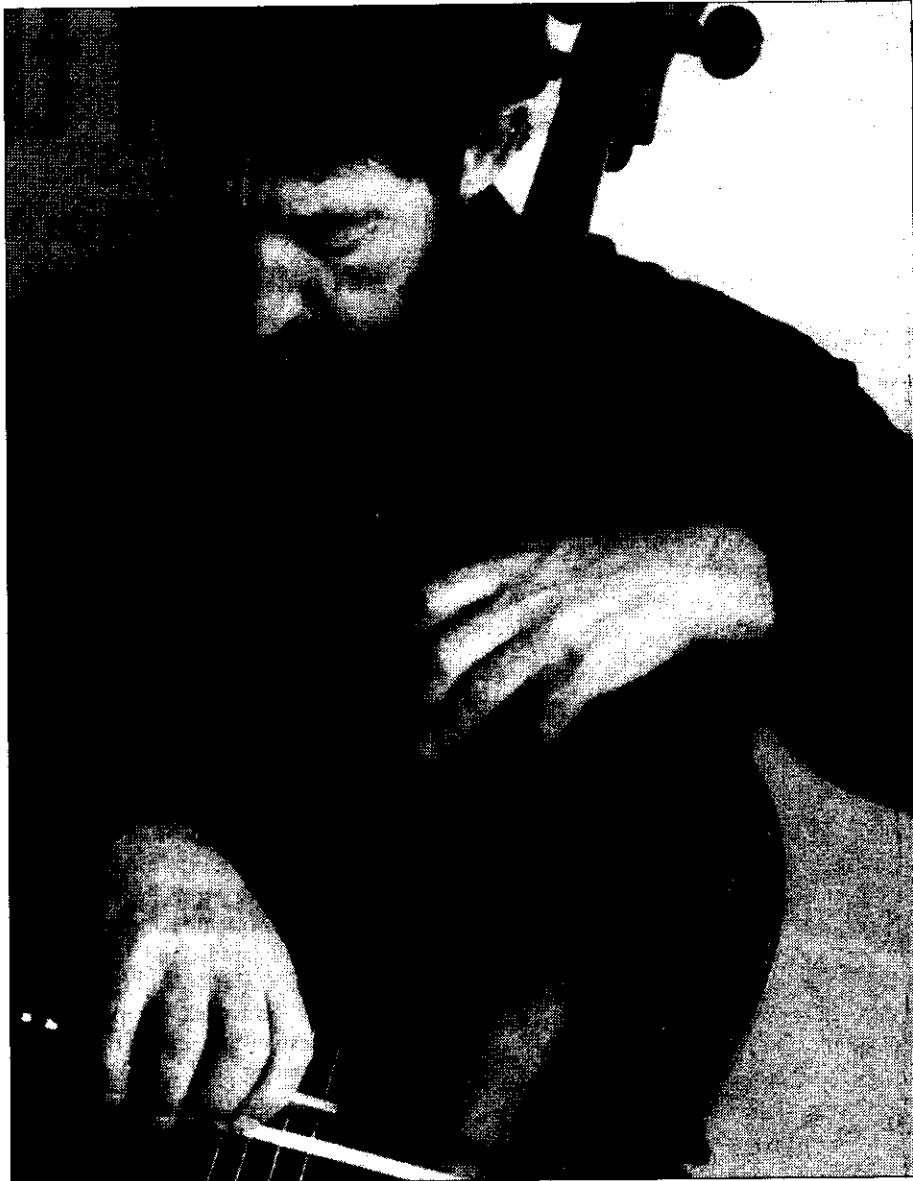
Within the field of music, Waks has catholic tastes. 'My son plays a lot of jazz and Latin and I'm very attracted to that. My daughter's current passion is hip hop – initially I thought the music was repetitive and the lyrics vulgar, but I kept listening and eventually I realised that within the field there's good and bad. It's not my favourite kind of music but it's a perfectly reasonable form of musical expression. The less you know about a particular genre, the less able you are to judge it.'

The future of fine music in Australia depends on the prism through which one looks at it.

'The audience is available for performing arts and the Sydney Symphony for one has successfully attracted them – we play to full houses, which is unusual,' he says.

'However, if you're writing or performing contemporary art music and getting audiences of 50 if you're lucky, your view is probably a little more jaded.

'The SSO can put on the Hindson because even if you think it's blasphemous to amplify the cello, that's not the only piece



of music you'll hear. In a contemporary music recital, however, all is unfamiliar.'

Professional marketing, furthermore, has become crucial in a world where dozens of groups and institutions are competing for the same leisure dollar. 'Orchestras can afford posters and PRs. Small organisations can't.'

But they too have a future; it's just more challenging.

'People clearly like to be with other people and to experience events. Fifteen thousand people came to hear a Mahler symphony – hello? – during the Olympic Arts Festival. Of course it was the association with the Games that brought them there in the first place, but a great number told us afterwards how much they enjoyed it. And Mahler is not particularly easy to listen to.

'When all is said and done, the future of music is in our hands.'

*Nathan Waks ... the future of fine music is in our hands.*

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Sydney Symphony  
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#### ON THE WEB

[http://www.symphony.org.au/about/vox\\_waks.shtml](http://www.symphony.org.au/about/vox_waks.shtml)