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**Matthew
Hindson**

MUSIC FOR HIS TIME

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YOUR FINE MUSIC STATION

On the fast ride

Matthew Hindson's music is unmistakably different, but it is on the programs of Australia's top musical organisations. RTA WILLIAMS discovers a hard-working composer sure of his controversial direction.

Matthew Hindson has gone mainstream. Thousands of classical music lovers are about to hear two of his works when this month Musica Viva presents *Rush* and the Sydney Symphony Orchestra performs *Speed*. He is a talent on the fast ride up, and, for the first time in his life, at age 30, a full-time composer in residence with the SSO.

Hindson has been a familiar figure on the new music scene for years. When his music was performed by the bigger ensembles it attracted the critics. 'They say it's the quiet ones you have to watch,' wrote John Carmody in the *Sun-Herald*. 'The young Sydney composer Matthew Hindson looks as if butter wouldn't melt in his mouth, but he writes music with such bellicose titles as *Death Stench* and *AK-47*. (*Death Stench* won the 2MBS-FM Young Composers Competition in 1996.) Fred Blanks named him Sydney's 'local cultist' in 1996, and *The Sydney Morning Herald* critic Roger Covell, knowing that Hindson was forging new ground in classical music, used half his review of an SSO concert which included Hindson's *Homage to Metallica* to explain what the composer was up to.

Hindson has reached the classical mainstream via popular genres including death metal and techno — that pulsing music that submerges the young and funky after midnight when they pound the dance floor at rave parties. He is not the first person to breach the gap. Kronos have been doing it for years, as when they performed their string quartet version cum imitation of Jimi Hendrix's *Purple Haze*. Then there have been crossover artists like Frank Zappa — who liked to break the rules in whatever genre he was working. In recent years record company Sony Music has been creating a niche in crossover, encouraging its pop and classical artists to work together.

But for some, precedents don't count, and Hindson is getting used to defending his position. 'It seems to be okay to be influenced by gamelan and folk music from around the world,' he told me in Sydney recently, 'whereas it's not okay to be influenced by the folk music, by popular music, of your own culture.'

To a certain extent, his was a conscious decision to break down the boundary between high and low art: to celebrate the diversity of music in contemporary society within the parameters of the classical tradition. But it is not all about ideology. 'That's just the sort of music that I really like,' he said, as though butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. 'I really enjoy listening to techno and death metal and all other sorts of music.'

'And I'm thinking, well what do I like about it, and how do they achieve it, and how can I achieve a simi-

lar sort of result in my own music. So it's more of a personal choice really, than trying to change the world or anything. And I've been lucky enough to have a lot of people who have helped me to be successful, you know, I've received a lot of commissions. But if that stops next year because for some reason I go out of fashion, then that's my problem, and that's my choice. I mean, I'll still be doing what I'm doing.'

Composer and music journalist Andrew Ford spoke to me about the risk of being fashionable. In short, fashion has its flip-side: in one year, out the next.

A new composer on the bills of the big music bodies is always going to become a talking point and, because of the few opportunities in classical music, the composer will stir controversy.

No-one disrespects Hindson's aesthetic choices, but some would never consider going there themselves. Is he too derivative? Has youth prevented him from curtailing a techno influence which is too obvious? Peter McCallum summed up the sentiment that I have heard in his review of *Techno Logic* in the *Herald* when he wrote: 'In [Hindson's] recent pieces based on the patterns of techno music and the mind states of raves, I feel he is yet to find the right edge and originality to make these patterns worth sitting still and listening to for the duration of the concert piece, whatever their efficacy in guiding the limbs through a night of non-stop dancing.'

It is difficult to sit still, without smiling, while listening to pieces like *Rave-Elation* and *RPM*. As *The Australian's* critic Martin Ball said of *Speed*, 'Part of the fun of this piece is realising how silly you feel sitting in a concert hall at 9.30pm when the music conjures a warehouse at 3am. Laugh? I nearly wet myself.'

Behind the controversy is a division in the Australian avant-garde. Sydney Conservatorium of Music lecturer Michael Smetanin considers the best of music being written today by Australian composers under 40 has blossomed on the musical ground made by avant-garde 20th-century composers. A lot has happened since Stockhausen, Berg and Webern, but it still isn't being performed by the mainstream orchestras.

Composers to have succeeded with the SSO, said Smetanin, are the ones who write 'audience-friendly' music. Hindson is the latest of these, following Carl Vine and Graeme Koehne, to name two composers who have made the billing in recent years.

What people are agreed on is the quality of Hindson's orchestral writing. It is 'brilliant', said Andrew Ford. For someone so young, said SSO artistic administrator Timothy Calnin, Matthew has runs on the board as an orchestral composer with an excellent technique. Fellow composer and good

friend Paul Stanhope is 'happily jealous' of the success that has gone Hindson's way. Hindson's orchestral technique, said Stanhope, is based on the sound lessons of Ravel and Copland.

Hindson learned his first lesson in orchestral composition aged 11. A viola player in the Wollongong Conservatorium's junior orchestra, he turned up to one rehearsal with parts for everyone except the conductor. Young Hindson had orchestrated a string trio. When the orchestra played it things suddenly went wayward. He had omitted a bar's rest in the cello parts. The conductor told Hindson the problem would have been solved if he had made a complete score for the conductor. He was then shown what one looked like.

At Edmund Rice College, in Wollongong, Hindson excelled in mathematics at high school, and was a computer geek. After Higher School Certificate he received one of 20 BHP university scholarships, and was set for a career in Engineering. But he was at a turning point, and had also applied for a Bachelor of Music.

When the University of Sydney Music Department accepted him into its composition stream, Hindson quit his scholarship and has seldom looked back. He studied with Eric Gross and Peter Sculthorpe, both of whose support he factors highly in the confidence he now finds to follow his musical interests. He went through the department with other outstanding musicians, including composer Elliot Gyger and conductor Antony Walker, who are now carving out their careers on foreign shores.

A second turning point took place in the early 1990s, when Hindson was at Melbourne University studying for a Master in Music with Brenton Broadstock. 'I was a bit too influenced by a sort of academic style of writing that has to look impressive on the page,' Hindson said. 'It's part of the Sydney-Melbourne thing I think. There is a difference, particularly at that time. The complexity thing was exploding and it was very strong, because they had Richard Barrett come down there from England, he had a residency down there, and you had Elision based down there, and Libra, [two of the country's top contemporary music ensembles], so if you wanted your music performed you had to write this sort of complexity-modernist style. Mind you, I didn't go that far, I still kind of kept myself in there.'

Hindson had written a piece for guitarist and fellow student Ken Murray, called *Mace*. Working with the guitarist has left Hindson with a thorough knowledge of writing for the instrument. One day, parts of *Mace* no longer sounded like something he had written. 'It could have been anyone,' he says. 'I thought, well, what in the hell am I doing, enough of this. And there was a turning point. I wrote a piece called *Chrissietina's Magic Fantasy* for two violins, and *AK-47*, and the second half of that piece is just a disco tune. At that time I thought, well why am I writing music?'

Hindson had been listening to 3RRR-FM in Melbourne. That was where he first heard techno,

and what caused his defection.

When he came back to Sydney, he channelled a new-found zeal into his teaching at MLC, Burwood. As director of strings and later director of composition, he taught his students that there was nothing magical about composition, said MLC'S head of music Karen Karey. Since Hindson started there, MLC has won the Australian Music Centre's award for best contribution to Australian Music by an education institution. The school now regularly commissions works from Australian composers, and it

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has performed all-Australian music concerts at the Opera House.

Karey observed the same 'butter wouldn't melt'-ness that causes a double-take when you hear Hindson's music and then meet the person. 'What comes out in his music seems to me very different to what you actually see in the person,' said Karey. Hindson can be shy and retiring, and has a mild, non-confrontational manner. But then, his music isn't all brash.

'He has written a cello piece, *Lament*, which is far more moody and sympathetic. And in the middle of *Chrissietina's Magic Fantasy*, for two violins, there's this chorale section, and I think it's really beautiful.

'Possibly his aggression could come out in the fact that he's very determined and he knows where he is going, and he's got his mark on a goal; and he's a very hard worker. But in his dealings with people, I don't see him as aggressive at all. Upfront, assertive, but not aggressive. He's a very good team player.'

Hindson has been generous with the success that has come his way. Composer colleagues report that he rarely withholds advice, and often recommends them for commissions or placements that he is unable to fulfil because of other commitments. He has been writing on commission alone for the last three years.

Trying to keep up with demand has kept Hindson at the desk inside his home office in Burwood. Friends say he works too hard, doesn't get out enough. His second passion doesn't help in that area, it is still computers. But he does enjoy spending time with his girlfriend of nine years, Christine, for whom he wrote *Love Serenade*. He is also studying with Ross Edwards for his PhD from Sydney University.

When I arrived at his house for our second interview one cold winter night, the stained glass windows of his front office were spilling light, and he was sitting inside with a rug over his lap and a score up on the computer. It was one of the three four-minute pieces he had been asked to write for the SSO's performances of *Siegfried*.

'We've asked him to write the interval calls for *Siegfried*,' said Timothy Calnin. It's a tra-

dition at Bayreuth to replace the ding-dongs with a segment of the orchestra performing a specially written work. Although he has drawn on Wagnerian themes, the compositions 'look like pure Hindson,' said Calnin.

As composer in residence with the Sydney Symphony for the next six months, Hindson will work with high school composers as part of SSO music education activities.

Hindson will attend as many orchestra rehearsals as he can, another part of the position. 'I'll be going to most of the rehearsals and just learning more and more,' he said. 'I think just from hearing this music from the inside you can pick up little tips and tricks, and it gives you a greater understanding of how the orchestra works, and what's possible and what's not possible.'

'I also write two other commissions, a 5-minute piece for the schools program, and a 10-minute concerto for a wind soloist.' Watch out for the latter. Calnin hopes the piece will be 'a real extension of what he's done so far', something that branches off into a different direction.

Along with music that is, as Calnin describes, 'highly energised, with a fantastic flair for orchestration and a good sense of humour, a kind of wicked wit which can be seen in the titles', Hindson has been noted for his softer style. Roger Covell realised it when he wrote of Hindson's 'alternations of the roles of tiger and lamb'. Whether Hindson will expand his music in this, or another direction, while working with the SSO, we'll know in 2001, when according to Calnin, the work will be performed by the SSO.

In the meantime, prepare to be immersed in the vibrant and highly-energised voice of a composer bringing unabashed *joie de vivre* into the concert hall.

Rita Williams edits *Stereo FM Radio*.

ON 2MBS-FM

Tuesday 10 August
'Music of Matthew Hindson'
Starts at 12.30pm