

SCENES FROM AN AUSTRALIAN CHILDHOOD

For piano

PROGRAMME NOTES

1. *Tarantella*
2. *Trees and Lightning*
3. *Garden Orb Web*
4. *Rainforest Toccata*
5. *Wombeyan Caves*
6. *Lanterns on Lake Illawarra*
7. *Fire Haze at Gerringong*

Scenes from an Australian Childhood, like Schumann's set of piano pieces with a similar title, is written from an adult's perspective. Each scene recalls some aspect of my childhood, with many set in the Illawarra region of New South Wales, Australia. This region, for me, was not the flat, drought-ridden landscape depicted by so many Australian poets and writers, but a country whose flora, fauna and natural weather patterns created a vibrant and exciting environment.

The order of the seven pieces in this edition is only a suggestion by the composer for performers wishing to play the collection in its entirety. In this form, the collection is flanked by two tarantellas and the stylistically different *Rainforest Toccata* holds centre place. It is also possible to perform these titles singularly or in other combinations. The seven pianistic representations of Australian life were composed over a twenty-six year period with the first, *Rainforest Toccata*, written in 1987 and the last, *Fire Haze at Gerringong*, completed in 2013.

Tarantella was written at the request of the talented English pianist Cordelia Williams. Hence the *Tarantella* is brilliant and virtuosic, but it gains its character and colour from its source of inspiration, the solar wind. At times the wind delights in its dance through the cosmic dust and at other times it is powerful and dynamic. Occasionally you can hear deep bass notes like drums—a reminder of the distant heartbeat of the sun where the solar wind originates. Only at the climax of the *Tarantella*, near the end of the piece, does the solar wind revisit its origins before being propelled into the universe again amidst the swirling star dust.

Cordelia Williams' premiere of *Tarantella* at the BBC Young Musician of the Year competition in 2001 was quickly followed by a recording on November 23 for Naim Audio. Roy Howat gave subsequent premieres at Festivals in Portugal and Japan the following year.

Trees & Lightning begins with an approaching storm. I remember these when driving through the National Park wilderness between the outskirts of Sydney and Wollongong when the gathering cloud took on an eerie greenish grey colour. The music depicts the heavy and intense stillness of the air with its suppressed dynamics in the opening bars against which there are bursts of lightning and brooding thunder. This eases forward into the central waltz where the artistic perspective alters to below the tree-line. Here one is looking up at the trees (gums, eucalyptus etc.)

whose white limbs are transformed in the lightning to reveal them moving in a fantastic dance.

Trees & Lightning was commissioned and premiered by American pianist Scott McCarrey on November 15, 2007 in the McKay auditorium, Brigham Young University, Hawaii.

The threads of the ***Garden Orb Web*** often hung in the front garden and were not easily forgotten once you had walked into the large, strong net as a child. The structure of the music loosely follows the web-building process of the Garden Orb spider, from establishing the upper bridge thread, the laying out of the radii to construction of the spiral. It completes the scene with the glistening of the morning dew on the web, a common sight on the side of Australia's more remote inland roads.

Garden Orb Web was premiered by Russian pianist Vladimir Stoupel on May 5, 2006 in the Kleiner Salle of the Berlin Konzerthaus, Germany.

Rainforest Toccata was composed in 1987. The opening section reflects the echoing acoustic and atmosphere of the 'Devil's Coachhouse' near the entrance to the Jenolan Caves in New South Wales, at the start of that lovely walk through the bush where one can watch rock wallabies at dusk. The other general inspiration is the sounds and scents of Australian rainforests: the piece's central dancing toccata section was specially marked by a magical afternoon listening to a forest of bellbirds on the escarpments of the NSW Central Coast. The whole performance should be very generously pedalled and bathed in a multitude of sonorities.

Roy Howat premiered ***Rainforest Toccata*** at Beith Arts Club, UK on 30 October 1988. He then toured the music in programmes throughout Scotland, England and New Zealand before giving the Australian premiere on August 20, 1989 for the ABC programme 'Broadwalk' broadcast live from the Sydney Opera House.

Wombeyan Caves was one of my family's favourite sites for camping holidays. The highlight of my stay was to be taken on a cave tour that wound along stone pathways and descended steel ladders into dimly lit caverns. Memories of the constant sound of dripping water, the smell of the rocks and areas of the caves that were transformed into grand limestone palaces are reproduced in a pianistic sound-world.

Wombeyan Caves was premiered by Russian pianist Vladimir Stoupel on May 5, 2006 in the Kleiner Salle of the Berlin Konzerthaus, Germany.

Lanterns on Lake Illawarra recalls the hundreds of gas lanterns lit on small boats and along the lake's shoreline on summer nights. As children we were woken in the middle of the night to catch the tide going out when the moon was full. Gas lanterns were hung from the side of the boat as we waited with our nets for the prawns to 'run'. ***Lanterns on Lake Illawarra*** takes the scenario one step further to create a musical fable in which the moon and the lantern are the main characters and are given musical themes. In short, the lantern is the false lover who lures the prawn towards

the net and this depiction is mingled with themes for the water, a pervading rumba-rhythm, and a myriad of stars above the lake before the final coda.

Lanterns on Lake Illawarra was commissioned and premiered by American pianist Scott McCarrey on November 15, 2007 in the McKay auditorium, Brigham Young University, Hawaii.

Fire Haze at Gerringong began its life as a sketch at the request of an ABC film director-producer making a documentary on the life of the Australian artist Lloyd Rees in 2008. The television programme illustrated the influence of Rees' paintings on my compositions. For this purpose, I performed the piano solo sketch in response to Rees' *Fire Haze at Gerringong*, and my choral work *Grace* was sung by Trinity College Choir (University of Melbourne) in connection with *Ascension 1*, Rees' painting of the interior of Chartres Cathedral. The incentive to complete the piano sketch came from Bobbie Miller, the Artistic Director of the Lloyd Rees Festival in 2013. ***Fire Haze at Gerringong*** is a dramatic tarantella swept along by the swirling bushfire smoke and the danger of the moment represented by the ominous and subtly hidden presence of a blood red sun in Rees' painting.

The premiere was given by the composer at the Lloyd Rees Gala Concert in Gerringong Town Hall on November 3, 2013. The timing of the premiere was particularly apt as huge bushfires on the tablelands had once again turned the afternoon sun blood red. Lloyd Rees' son and daughter-in-law, Alan and Jan Rees, were present and led the audience in a standing ovation which touched the composer deeply.