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Creating poetry in motion

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Violinist Rupert Guenther shapes music the way a painter brings a canvas to life, weaving a story with each new sound. On the eve of a national tour, the composer shares his passion for classical improvisation with Julie Hosking.



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Rupert Guenther grew up surrounded by art and ideas. It was not uncommon to come home from school in Melbourne and find the likes of renowned Austrian conductor Nikolaus Harnoncourt or Australian mezzo-soprano Suzanne Johnston in the living room. This revolving door of musicians, artists and philosophers clearly left its mark.

"It was a very creative time," Guenther says from the Toodyay farm that has been his home for the past two years. "My siblings all played music, so it was a natural progression for me to start violin at a young age and I pretty soon knew that was my destiny in this life."

Predetermined or not, Guenther's artistic journey has been little short of stellar. After finishing his music degree at the Victorian College of the Arts, the young violinist headed to Vienna to study further. While he honed his skills in the opera halls and orchestra pits of Europe, Guenther plays electric and acoustic violins across a range of genres, including blues, classical, rock and world music. His reputation for versatility has led him to work with artists as diverse as the Vienna Chamber Orchestra, Beatles producer George Martin and singer Olivia Newton-John.

But it was Guenther's desire to perform his own music that led him to make the rather bold move into classical improvisation – a field that still has few practitioners more than 20 years and 28 albums after he took that first step. His innovative approach to composition has taken him around Australia, the UK and Europe to perform (and teach).

[*New Letters to Esterhazy Sonata 1*](#), recorded in one take with no overdubs, is named for the 18th century court of Austro-Hungarian prince Nikolaus Esterhazy, whose support for the arts changed the face of Western music. The five movements represent five imagined letters to composer Franz Joseph Haydn.

"The letters are about the humanity within each of us. And how this comes about in the sonatas is through expressing appreciation for being able to stand here, 200 years later, and play music which means something to our humanity," Guenther says.



Author —
Julie Hosking

A journalist with more words to her name than she can count, Julie Hosking has worked for newspapers, magazines and online publications in Melbourne and Perth. She has been a news editor, travel editor, features editor, arts editor and, for one terrifying year, business editor, before sanity prevailed and she landed in her happy place - magazines. If pushed (literally), she favours the swing.

JH: How did *New Letters to Esterhazy* come about?

RG: I was invited to record several days at the ABC studios in Melbourne in 2007, and it was only afterwards that I was able to piece together what the music was about. That's the way the muse often works. While the music itself is very much of now, the spirit of it is all about the great humanitarian ideals Haydn held and shone into the world through his music. He set classical music on a new course forever, which was then furthered by his two most famous students, Mozart and Beethoven. These improvisations are the letters to Haydn, conversations if you like, to convey that what he envisioned for the world succeeded, that the ideals continue even on these distant shores hundreds of years later, that some of us are still carrying that torch he passed on.



JH: What is the inspiration behind the other three works on the program?

RG: *Hakone Maple* is strongly influenced by the traditional Japanese shakuhachi flute tradition of playing. It's a very meditative way of playing, the duration of each phrase only as long as could be made from one out-breath on a flute and leaving lots of silences throughout the work. It comes from my experience of visiting the delicate forests of the Hakone Mountains and temples in Japan when I was a teenager. *So Many Stars* is modelled more on the mystical music and ecstatic poetry of the hermit saints of 13th century Persia and the Middle East. *Wandjina* is from a suite of music based on the remote Kimberley, with its vast night skies, desert country and ancient culture, from which the mythical Wandjina being comes to us – a protector, a giver and taker of life.

JH: In July, you perform *Music from Inside the Pyramids*, the third of four concerts at WA Museum Boola Bardip. How did this series come about?

RG: These concerts are a big part of what I love about being a creative music artist, where I can collaborate with a gallery or museum, for example, and create a bespoke work which is site specific and very relevant in its content. Each of the four concerts were inspired by exhibits and feature my music, but also narration and fabulous images on large screen projection. There is an exhibition which includes a large screen showing a sequence of these marvellous astrophotography images, which inspired *The Cosmology Concert*, back in February. We've just had the *Ancient Messengers* concert, which pondered the vast history and upheavals that have shaped the Earth as we know it. After *Music from Inside the Pyramids* in July, we have *Journeys* in November, exploring the forces that have moved the developing human populations across the globe.

JH: Tell us a bit more about *Music from Inside the Pyramids*.

RG: The concert represents an examination of the ancient Egyptian culture with its emphasis on what they called the Afterlife. It draws inspiration from the scrolls, hieroglyphs, frescos and relics from the pyramids, the places of Egyptians' sacred initiations into the spiritual world, and from my own mystical inner journeys in life. The music gives a feeling of what it was like to be there and takes us on an evocative journey to those sacred places and times. The concert is a multi-media performance with not only strongly eastern-flavoured music, but also a text narration, and a coordinated sequence of magnificent images of ancient Egyptian scenes and artefacts projected onto a six-metre screen. It has been inspired by a new special exhibition at the museum called *Discovering Ancient Egypt*. People can go to the exhibition and then come along to the concert.

JH: Improvisation is commonly associated with jazz – how do you encourage it with classical music?

RG: I teach what I call the “lost art of classical improvisation” – and I wrote a book on the subject back in 2003 when I first started performing my concerts of improvisations, because improvisation doesn't really exist anymore as a classical music concert art form. Yet it was quite common until around the mid 18th century. Back in 2012-2013, WAAPA invited me to teach my approaches to classical music improvisation after they heard one of my improvised piano and violin sonatas. I continue to teach improvisation to classical musicians around the world at various universities and conferences and recently returned from the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama in Cardiff where I facilitated workshops on improvisation at the European Strings Teachers Association International Conference. It is extremely rewarding to experience music you've never heard before unfolding before you, and often as much a surprise for the young musicians themselves.

JH: You have travelled the world and performed with some big names. Can you share a particular 'pinch-me' moment?

RG: It does sound like a glamorous thing working with these names, and of course musically they are giants, but the thing I remember most is how a person is towards others. Olivia Newton-John, Demis Roussos and Sir George Martin left the biggest impression, because they were generous good people who understood their good fortune in life, and they never treated us as anything less than themselves as people.

JH: You've settled in Toodyay – how does that environment influence your capacity to create beautiful music?

RG: We've only been two years on the farm, but I find it very restoring to be here in fresh air and nature after decades of living in the CBDs of Melbourne, London and Vienna. Having a few pet donkeys and sheep is an absolutely delightful part of it, too. Humans need to live life in a reflective way to be well and to be able to function with the world in ways that don't harm others or themselves. We are seeing the results of people not having this restorative dimension in their lives and I feel we all have duty to bring it back. It may be through music, or education, or how we do business or diplomacy. I'm a great advocate of being close to nature but I'm also a great advocate of making time to meditate each day, and live even a busy life in the most holistic ways possible. I think that has a beauty of its own which I like to bring to my music.