

SYDNEY
FESTIVAL
7-29 JAN 2017

BIOGRAPHICA

SYDNEY CHAMBER OPERA IN ASSOCIATION WITH ENSEMBLE OFFSPRING
AUSTRALIA | WORLD PREMIERE
MARY FINSTERER & TOM WRIGHT

BIOGRAPHICA

CONTENTS

1 SYDNEY FESTIVAL 2017 - Programme Notes

2 ARTICLE #1 - The Australian

3 ARTICLE #2 - Limelight Magazine

4 REVIEWS

- **Excerpts from all reviews**
- **Examples of reviews**



MITCHELL BUTEL as Cardano

BIOGRAPHICA

SYDNEY CHAMBER OPERA IN ASSOCIATION
WITH ENSEMBLE OFFSPRING | AUSTRALIA
WORLD PREMIERE
BAY 20
CARRIAGEWORKS
7-9 & 11-13 JANUARY
90 MINS

Music & Concept Mary Finsterer

Libretto Tom Wright

Conductor Jack Symonds

Director Janice Muller

Set and Costume Design Charles Davis

Lighting Design Matt Cox

AV Design James Brown

Gerolamo Cardano Mitchell Butel

Soprano 1 (Chiara – mother) Jane Sheldon

Soprano 2 (Chiara – daughter) Jessica O'Donoghue

Mezzo Soprano (Caterina) Anna Fraser

Tenor (Aldo/Cassanate) Andrew Goodwin

Baritone (Archbishop/Giambattista) Simon Lobelson

Flutes Lamorna Nightingale

Clarinets Jason Noble

Saxophones Christina Leonard

Piano/Celesta Zubin Kanga

Harp Rowan Phemister

Percussion Claire Edwardes

Violins Miki Tsunoda, Anna McMichael

Viola/Viola d'amore James Wannan

Cello Freya Schack-Arnott

Double Bass Kirsty McCahon

Production Manager Damion Holling

Assistant Director Danielle Maas

Assistant Conductor Huw Belling

Costume Maker Jessica Allison

Stage Management Georgiane Deal, Cheng Tang

Surtitles Rhys Little

SYNOPSIS

Scene I: Horoscope

On the date he predicted he would die, Gerolamo Cardano reviews his astrological chart.

Scene II: The Birth of Gerolamo Cardano

Many years before, in 1500, Cardano's mother grapples with grief while pregnant with Cardano.

Scene III: The Knowable Machine

Cardano considers the complexity of the universe and our place within it.

Scene IV: The Cure

Cardano visits Archbishop John Hamilton in Edinburgh, whose physicians are unable to diagnose or treat his illness.

Scene V: The Demise of Chiara

Extremely ill with syphilis, Cardano's only daughter Chiara faces death.

Scene VI: Stars

A young Chiara joins her father to contemplate the night sky.

Scene VII: The Auriotomy of Aldo Cardano

Cardano's second son Aldo is in prison and threatened with torture. He has stolen valuable items, including many from his own father's house.

Scene VIII: Lock of Combinations

The chorus explain the mechanisms of Cardano's most famous invention, which became the modern combination lock.

Scene IX: The Crime of Giambattista Cardano

Cardano's eldest son Giambattista poisons his wife's breakfast before confronting her about her infidelity, a crime for which he will later be executed.

Scene X: Ghosts

As Cardano reflects on the delicate balance between knowledge and wisdom, he is haunted by the ghosts of his children.

Scene XI: Examination

Cardano's presentation to a medical board goes awry and he is again excluded from the College of Physicians in Milan.

Scene XII: Day of Death

In Cardano's final moments, he hears the call of angels, who sing his favourite proverb.

CREATOR'S NOTE

In *Biographica* I've focused on capturing an essence of Renaissance music by filtering it through a contemporary lens. There are centuries of musical history in conversation – sometimes easy, sometimes intentionally confused – following the diverse, fascinating character of Cardano himself and his capricious life. As his narrative unfolds, the musical worlds intensify, creating perilous mayhem but also mathematical precision.

The composition aims to catch moments in the journey and demise of an eccentric, wondrous soul from the beginnings of our modern age. It's like a visit to a great portrait gallery, full of different paintings – but all depicting the same person.

Mary Finsterer

MARY FINSTERER

Mary Finsterer is one of Australia's most innovative orchestral composers and the Chair of Composition at the Sir Zelman Cowen School of Music, Monash University. She has been a winner and finalist in numerous APRA AMCOS ART Music Awards with her pieces 'Falling', 'Aerea', 'Lake Ice (Missed Tales No.1)' and 'Darkest Light'. 'Silva' featured in the Ensemble Offspring program at the Sydney Opera House before touring nationally. Mary's score for Shirley Barrett's feature *South Solitary* was released on ABC Classics | Universal. She has won many awards in Europe, Britain, USA and Canada and represented Australia in five International Society for Contemporary Music festivals.

TOM WRIGHT

Tom Wright has written for the stage since the early 1990s. He was Associate Director of Sydney Theatre Company 2004–12 and is currently Associate Artist at Belvoir. His plays and adaptations include *A Journal of the Plague Year*, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, *Ubu*, *This Is a True Story*, *Lorile*, *Babes in the Wood*, *Tense Dave*, *The Odyssey*, *The Lost Echo*, *Criminology* (with Lally Katz), *Tales From the Vienna Woods*, *The Women of Troy*, *The War of the Roses*, *The Duel*, *Baal*, *Optimism*, *Oresteia*, *On the Misconception of Oedipus*, *The Histrionic*, *Black Diggers* and *Picnic at Hanging Rock*.

JACK SYMONDS

Jack Symonds is a composer, conductor, accompanist and Artistic Director of Sydney Chamber Opera. He studied composition at the Royal College of Music in London and at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music where he received the University Medal. He has conducted the Australian premieres of *Owen Wingrave*, *Into the Little Hill*, *...pas à pas – nulle part...*, *An Index of Metals*, *Passion*, and world premieres of *Mayakovsky*, *Fly Away Peter* and his own *Notes from Underground*. As a composer, he has recently written for the JACK Quartet, Australian Chamber Orchestra, Australia Piano Quartet, Streeton Trio, Bendigo International Festival, Timo-Veikko Valve, Jane Sheldon and Affinity Collective.

JANICE MULLER

Janice is currently Director in Residence at Malthouse Theatre in Melbourne. She received the inaugural Playwriting Australia Dramaturgy Fellowship in 2006, the VCA's Keith & Elisabeth Murdoch Travelling Scholarship in 2001 and 2003, and was invited to participate in the Royal Court's international residency program. Recent projects include *Turbine* (Malthouse Theatre), *Lake Disappointment* (Carriageworks), and *The Tribe* (Belvoir and Urban Theatre Projects/Sydney Festival 2015). Previous credits include dramaturgy for *The Piper* (My Darling Patricia, Carriageworks and Sydney Festival 2014), *White Rabbit*, *Red Rabbit* (Malthouse Theatre), *A Woman in Berlin* (co-adapted with Meredith Penman for Old Fitzroy Theatre 2009 and Malthouse Theatre 2010).



Arts
NSW



CARRIAGEWORKS

KAWAI
THE FUTURE OF THE PIANO



THE STAR

BIOGRAPHICA COMMISSIONING DONORS

Julian Burnside AO QC, Nelson Meers Foundation, Jane Mathews AO, Maureen Wheeler AO, Paula & Rob McLean, Sherry & Tom Gregory, Richard Rufus & the New Empire Cinema NSW, Father John O'Neill & Charles Davidson.

SPECIAL THANKS

Dean Golja & Image United, Sir Zelman Cowen School of Music Monash University, Professor Rae Frances, Assoc. Professor Thomas Reiner, Dr Joel Crotty, Dr Jonathan Macintosh, Lady Anna Cowen, Felix Nobis, Kim Williams AM, Lieven Bertels, Peter Murphy & Associates, Belinda Shanahan, Monica and Finsterer family, Wil Golja, Ruby Cleary, Eve Golja, Thomas Tregenza, Daniel Whitely & D&A Consulting, Roland Peelman, The Song Company, Kate Durham, Brenton Broadstock, Countess Primrose Krasicki, Megan Burslem and Diana Fraser.

Special thanks to Timothy Daly, Roland Peelman, Song Company and all the artists who have contributed to the development of this project.

Anna Fraser appears courtesy of The Song Company.

Biographica received seed funding from the Australian Government's Major Festival Initiative in association with the Confederation of Australian International Arts Festivals.

Biographica is supported by the Australia Government through the Australia Council, its arts advisory body, and the NSW Government through Arts NSW.

SYDNEY CHAMBER OPERA

Co-founded by Artistic Director Jack Symonds and Louis Garrick in 2010, Sydney Chamber Opera is at the forefront of contemporary chamber opera in Australia and has developed a distinctive presence in Sydney and beyond. It is committed to the development of opera as a contemporary performance form, balancing a program of world premieres of new Australian work with Australian premieres of recent international work. SCO has received critical acclaim for its innovative programming, musical rigour and compelling theatre making. It has made work for the Sydney Festival (2014, 2016), Melbourne Festival (2015) and Biennale of Sydney (2012, 2016) and is a resident company at Carriageworks.

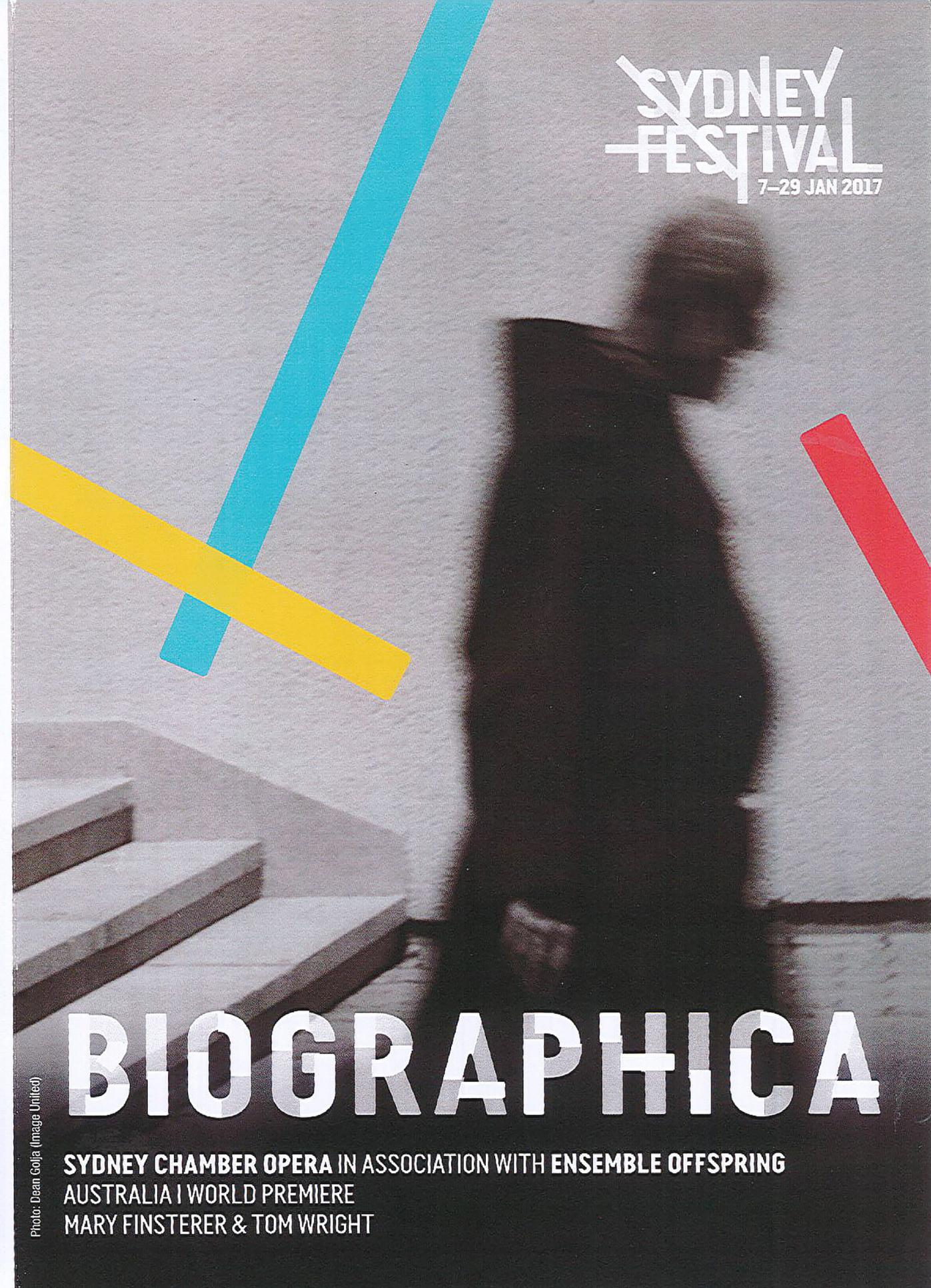
ENSEMBLE OFFSPRING

Ensemble Offspring are champions of adventurous new music. Presenting music from seminal chamber work to free improvisation, alongside the creation of striking interdisciplinary productions, the group embraces open-minded music making in all forms. Based in Sydney, Ensemble Offspring is led by acclaimed percussionist Claire Edwardes and features some of Australia's most innovative and virtuosic performers. The group has toured Hong Kong, London, Brugge and Warsaw and performs at venues including Carriageworks, Sydney Opera House and even local Sydney bowling clubs. Passionate about nurturing the work of emerging as well as established composers, Ensemble Offspring has premiered over 200 works in its 20-year history.



Mitchell Butel as Cardano. Sydney Festival 2017

Image: Dean Golja (Image United)



SYDNEY
FESTIVAL
7-29 JAN 2017

BIOGRAPHICA

SYDNEY CHAMBER OPERA IN ASSOCIATION WITH ENSEMBLE OFFSPRING
AUSTRALIA | WORLD PREMIERE
MARY FINSTERER & TOM WRIGHT

Photo: Dean Golja (Image United)

ARTS

Gerolamo Cardano centre stage for Mary Finsterer's *Biographica*



Mary Finsterer found the central character of her first opera when she happened by chance on one of his books. Picture: Renee Nowytargeter

When Mary Finsterer was a music student in her early 20s, she worked for a time as an accompanist to a magician called Charles Panache. He was a comic illusionist and his tricks would quite deliberately dash his audience's expectations. Instead of producing a white dove from out of thin air, Panache would bring forth a dead pigeon. Finsterer's role at the keyboard was to provide the "sting" — or musical "ta-dah!" — that would announce another feat of wayward magic.

Since that time Finsterer has made her living as a composer and teacher. She has written music for contemporary outfits such as Ensemble Offspring and Ensemble InterContemporain, and has worked on film scores as various as *Die Hard 4* and the lighthouse drama *South Solitary*. But her latest project — an opera, *Biographica*, to be given its premiere by Sydney Chamber Opera at the Sydney Festival — in some ways has taken her back to that world of mystery and sleight of hand.

The opera is about 16th-century Italian inventor, philosopher and gambler Gerolamo Cardano: a true Renaissance man whose inquiring mind ventured into fields such as mathematics, engineering, natural history, medicine and occult arts of divination. Finsterer first learned of him when, almost by accident, she happened upon his *Liber de ludo aleae* (*Book on Games of Chance*).

"It was serendipitous in a way," she says. "I was walking through the ANU library about 20 years ago and I came across this little book just by chance — which is interesting because the book is about chance ... It's about how to gamble, but he was also talking about how to dress, how to cheat. It's a historical document, but it brought to the fore this human being."

Finsterer says she had been looking for a subject for an opera that would dramatise questions to do with identity, knowledge and self-actualisation. "Who am I, what path am I on?" says the composer over a cup of coffee at Carriageworks in central Sydney. "We almost have to ask ourselves every day. If we want to be creative we have to choose those things. It's a creative process."

In Cardano, born 1501, she found a larger-than-life figure to stand in for such existential questions. He wrote more than a dozen books, including an autobiography that Finsterer says she struggled through in an English translation. Among his achievements were theories about negative numbers and probability, mechanical inventions such as the combination lock and insights into the existence of allergens.

Filled with scientific discoveries, Cardano's life was not short of tragic and violent incident. Knife fights over gambling, imprisonment for heresy, a son convicted of murder and beheaded ... it goes on. Cardano was obsessed with personal fame and while he may be an obscure figure today — compared with near contemporaries Leonardo and Copernicus — he certainly achieved celebrity in his lifetime. It has been suggested he inspired the figure of the magician Prospero in *The Tempest*.

“He is full of contrasts, he epitomises what it is to be human, the dark, the light,” Finsterer says. “His autobiography is warts and all; it brings to the fore everything that it is to be human. He doesn't hold back on anything. The interesting thing is that he doesn't have the natural filters that human beings usually have.”

Finsterer has collaborated with writer Tom Wright, whose libretto for *Biographica*, in Latin and - English, dramatises key episodes from Cardano's life. We first encounter him consulting the stars to divine the date of his own death. We see him cure an archbishop of asthma, invent the combination lock and despair at the fate of his children. In the penultimate scene Wright's Cardano invokes the mysterious substance of fame: “I drink it and pass it through my vitals.”

Interestingly, for an opera, Finsterer has chosen not to assign a musical voice to Cardano, in the sense of depicting his character through sung vocal lines. Instead, she has an actor, Mitchell Butel, playing the role, while five singers make up the chorus and play other characters as required.

“I wanted to rethink, ‘What is opera?’ ” Finsterer says. “I grew up with this sense of theatre being very strong. I love that immediacy with theatre; it brings you up close to characters. Opera is kind of the opposite: you enjoy the action, and then they stop for an aria, a distilled moment where a singer is really able to explore emotion. I wanted to bring the immediacy of the spoken word into the medium of opera, this idea of mingling spoken word and sung.”

She also has looked back to the musical conventions of Cardano's time but reimagined them with modernist techniques such as serialism. “Renaissance music is essentially based on tertian harmony,” she says. “The whole idea of horizontal movement and voice-leading from one note to the next is very important: it's a study of relationships ...

“I thought, how can I use this past knowledge so we feel a sense of familiarity? We know the terrain but we don't know how it's going to unfold. How can I reimagine voice-leading so the elements are the same but the way they unfold is different? To do that, I drew upon serial techniques to construct progressions that are not necessarily what you expect.”

Her score for small orchestra — Ensemble Offspring, conducted by SCO's Jack Symonds — uses modern instruments but with the addition of viola da gamba, the early version of the cello.

Finsterer has written many pieces for small ensembles, and orchestral and multimedia works, but *Biographica* is her first opera. A few years ago a 20-minute excerpt was given a workshop reading at New Opera Ventures Australia, where contemporary opera is showcased for possible presenters. Then Sydney Festival artistic director Lieven Bertels saw it and decided to include it in the festival, which is now under the direction of Wesley Enoch.

More than 20 years since a mysterious book revealed itself to her, *Biographica* and the brilliant, complicated figure of Cardano are about to have their operatic debut.

“I've been patient, I'm really happy that it's happening now,” Finsterer says. “I've waited so long, if it was going to be another year down the track, or five, I don't care. It's not very often that you write an opera. I wanted to get it right and have the right people supporting it.”

She makes an observation worthy of Cardano: “It's almost like all the planets have aligned.”

Sydney Chamber Opera presents Biographica at Carriageworks, Sydney, Saturday to January 13, 7.30pm.

MATTHEW WESTWOOD January 3, 2017

LIMELIGHT

AUSTRALIA'S CLASSICAL MUSIC AND ARTS MAGAZINE

HOME NEWS **FEATURES** EVENTS CD/DVD REVIEWS LIVE REVIEWS M

Limelight Magazine > Features > Re-inventing Renaissance man

FEATURES - CLASSICAL MUSIC | OPERA

Re-inventing Renaissance man

by *Mary Finsterer* on December 28, 2016 (December 28, 2016) filed under [Classical Music](#) | [Opera](#) | [Comment Now](#)



Mary Finsterer

From science to surgery by way of a treatise on cheating, Mary Finsterer's new opera runs one man's extraordinary gamut.

My new chamber opera *Biographica* has been part of my life for a long time – almost two decades in fact; but it's not as if I've been working on it constantly. I like having a large-scale piece in the background while I'm working on other projects. This enables me to compose different works, drawing on the same research.

Being fascinated by ancient history and mythology, I'd long been playing with the idea of an opera based on the concept of the Ancient Greek practice of *palaestra*, or wrestling, which can also be a wrestling of thoughts and ideas. What I needed was a story on which to hang the idea.

The question was, what were we going to see on stage? In the library one day, I came across a book about Gerolamo Cardano, an eccentric Renaissance genius who wrote the first texts on the mathematics of gambling and cheating. He was also a world-renowned surgeon and a pioneer of sign language. He revolutionised complex numbers and, having lived in a time where

the line between science and mysticism was frequently blurred, drew upon both to seek an understanding to life and immortality. Cardano's life provided a vehicle for a story about thoughts, wrestling and debating. Playwright Tom Wright has provided a beautiful libretto synthesising the dramatic narrative of Cardano's life with the complexity of his thought.

In the opera I've tried to capture an essence of Renaissance music by filtering it through a contemporary lens. There are centuries of musical history in conversation; sometimes easy, sometimes intentionally confused, following the diverse, fascinating character of Cardano himself and his capricious life.

I use tertian (3-note) harmony as the basic building block, but in ordering that elemental material, I draw from serialism to assist me with chord progressions and voice-leading. I'm interested in finding ways to take the listeners to places that are perhaps unexpected or even surprising. The material is derived from the Renaissance, yet the method by which it's constructed is developed from the modernist aesthetic. I wanted to bring the two worlds together. As the narrative of Cardano unfolds, the musical worlds intensify, creating perilous mayhem – but also mathematical precision.

Essentially the composition tries to catch moments in the journey and demise of an eccentric, wondrous soul from the beginnings of our modern age. It's like a visit to a great portrait gallery, full of different paintings – but all depicting the same person.

MARY FINSTERER December 28, 2016

BIOGRAPHICA – REVIEWS

The Australian

‘Inventive, engaging, stimulating and moving, *Biographica* is an outstanding new opera.

It deserves regular performances as well as a permanent place in the repertory.’

‘Finsterer’s music proved to be as eclectic and wide-ranging as Cardano’s intellectual pursuits. Scored for a chamber ensemble of strings, woodwinds, keyboards and percussion, *Biographica*’s complex yet crystalline textures, evocative instrumental colours, intricate rhythms and Renaissance-inspired vocal writing resulted in an absorbing, appealing sound-world...’

MURRAY BLACK January 9, 2017



Sydney Morning Herald ★★★★★

‘Rather than write pastiche Renaissance polyphony, Finsterer’s score recreates the Renaissance sound world with modern musical codes, using imaginative instrumentation, scattered modernist textures, and instrumental figuration to animate, transform and sometimes subvert the glistening vocal sonorities from an outstanding cast of singers.

Its most musically interesting elements are Finsterer’s ear for original, dramatically appropriate instrumental and vocal combinations and the way musical processes intersect with mathematical ones, in a collision of the sensual and the rational.

For the final scene, Finsterer recreates a Renaissance dance with raucous woodwind and percussion intrusions, like a grimly realistic dance of death.

[*Biographica* is a] balance of iridescent purity and gritty noise...an aural equivalent reminiscent of Oscar Wilde's image of a person lying in the gutter staring at the stars.'

PETER MCCALLUM January 8, 2017



Limelight Magazine ★★★★★

'Though Finsterer's score is derived from Renaissance music, it is more than merely pastiche. Contemporary inflections and sounds creep in subtly at first – shimmering harmonics adorning more conventional Renaissance melodies – but with increasing intensity. Serial elements – reflecting Cardano's own mathematical experiments – lend the music a more complex, menacing patina as the work progresses. The music is almost relentlessly ominous, accompanying Butel's dialogue with a pulsing, film-music intensity or ramping up the anxious mood with glittering, ethereal chimes... Finsterer's score thrums with energy throughout, making this a worthy addition to the Australian operatic canon.'

ANGUS MCPHERSON January 8, 2017



TimeOut ★★★★★

‘By analogy, the composer Finsterer draws deep from the medieval minstrel origins of Renaissance music, but links up with intervening periods and contemporary art music styles, delivering highly appealing yet substantive fabrics for every scene. It succeeds paradoxically by being both palatable and unsettling, like the tale it carries.

A triumphant level of achievement is what Sydney has come to routinely expect from the SCO; this premiere of a much-anticipated work by a professor from Monash University shows they are now a significant national cultural asset.

This is an exemplary achievement for the Sydney Festival: new, fresh high art that will be enjoyed by a wider audience than any accountant would have predicted.’

JASON CATLETT January 10, 2017



Bachtrack ★★★★★

'Biographica: a mazy musical melange at Sydney's Carriageworks

Mary Finsterer has managed a musical melange that crosses effortlessly and delightfully from the Renaissance to today which makes *Biographica* the most musically successful of the young Sydney Chamber Opera's commissions.'

JEREMY ECCLES January 9, 2017



Partial Durations

'Opening this week as part of the Sydney Festival, Mary Finsterer's new opera *Biographica*... a major new work by one of our finest living composers.

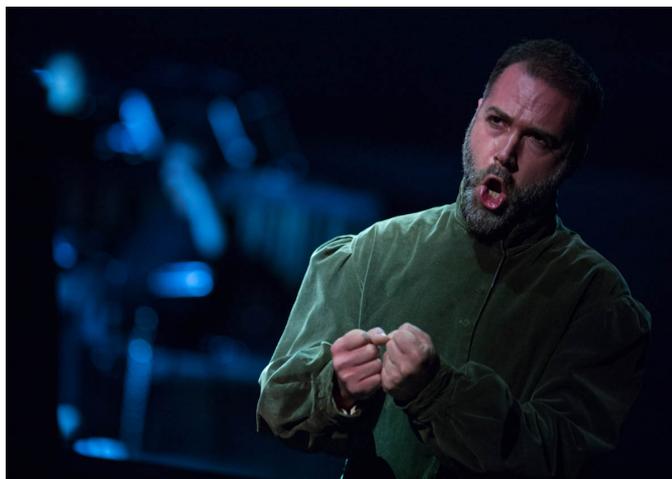
In the music for *Biographica*, Finsterer re-processes Renaissance musical language but not simply as pastiche, this is something more profound... we find Renaissance materials (melodic, harmonic, and gestural) filtered through a 21st century sensibility and technique.

Finsterer is a composer who has always used extended playing techniques fluently as very natural sonorities alongside more conventional sounds, they never seem like mere effects in her music.

The score for *Biographica* is full of lovely colours, both dramatic and subtle. The result is captivating, intelligent, and theatrically powerful.

Final tribute [is given] to Mary Finsterer. *Biographica* is a beautiful, haunting and thought-provoking work from an important composer of our time.'

ALISTAIR NOBLE January 12, 2017



Stage Whispers

'The Sydney Festival kicks off premiering this rousing local chamber opera from composer Mary Finsterer and librettist Tom Wright.

Finsterer's score begins with Renaissance formalism but speeds quickly into an expressive narrative of surprising, sometimes melodious, musical elements, notably with percussive thrills. It's a modernist mix appropriate for the journey of this capricious genius on the cusp of the modern age... Finsterer's [music is] high drama. '

MARTIN PORTUS January 9, 2017



Harry Fiddler

‘The life of scholar Gerolamo Cardano (1501-1576) is an impossible tale. Obsession. Delusion. Murder. Betrayal. Invention. No one medium could do hope to do justice to the complexity of this Renaissance (in every sense, including temporal) man, so thank goodness for opera, thank goodness for composer Mary Finsterer and thank goodness for the many hands which came together to make this palimpsest of sights, sounds, words and music.

Finsterer, along with librettist Tom Wright, creates his life story as an episodic work, flitting backwards and forwards in time, like a series of Holbein portraits, each coherent as a whole but studded with secrets.

There is an intricate mechanism to decipher, and multiple death scenes. And running through all of it, there is Finsterer’s delicately patterned music, repeating, evolving. I wanted to step back to take in the whole picture but, at the same time, I didn’t want to miss any of the detail.’

HARRIET CUNNINGHAM January 8, 2017



Financial Times

‘[With] meticulous craftsmanship in her toolkit, Mary Finsterer’s opera is a vote of confidence in the mainstream appeal of new music.’

SHIRLEY APTHORP January 10, 2017

Images: Dean Golja (Image United)

Biographica: opera tackles Cardano's emotional flaws



Mitchell Butel as Gerolamo Cardano in *Biographica*, Sydney Festival. Picture: Lisa Tomasetti.

Murray Black

The Australian

12:00AM January 9, 2017

The life and work of the Italian Renaissance polymath Gerolamo Cardano (1501-76) was rich in incident and achievement. Brilliant accomplishments in the fields of mathematics, science and medicine brought him fame and fortune across Europe.

Yet his later years were overshadowed by tragedy. His older son was beheaded for poisoning his adulterous wife, his younger son was a compulsive thief and his daughter died of syphilis contracted through prostitution. It's a story ripe for operatic treatment.

Composer Mary Finsterer and librettist Tom Wright's new opera *Biographica* is an episodic, 12-scene snapshot of Cardano's professional and personal life. Its dramatic power largely derives from an intriguing double duality. Although an intellectual genius, Cardano is portrayed as being emotionally deficient.

In several scenes, he eloquently lectures the audience on his then cutting-edge views on maths, science, astronomy and humanity's place in the cosmos. Elsewhere, he is an emotionally mute, detached observer.

In one scene, he coolly explains the symptoms of syphilis while his daughter, Chiara, writhes in agony on a straw bed. In another, his now-dead three children berate him for his lack of love. His response is to

walk away. So articulate and erudite in his intellectual pursuits, Cardano is virtually devoid of emotional intelligence.

This conflict is cleverly represented by *Biographica*'s second duality. Cardano is portrayed by a non-singing actor while a quintet of singers represents his tragic family members.

It was a brilliantly realised conceit. As Cardano, Mitchell Butel was a compelling and commanding presence. Inflecting every phrase with meaning and purpose, he captured his character's astounding intellect and his difficult and volatile personality.

By contrast, the vocal quintet successfully balanced beauty of sound with the need for expressive intensity, thereby conveying their characters' emotional pain and despair.

Finsterer's music proved to be as eclectic and wide-ranging as Cardano's intellectual pursuits. Scored for a chamber ensemble of strings, woodwinds, keyboards and percussion, *Biographica*'s complex yet crystalline textures, evocative instrumental colours, intricate rhythms and Renaissance-inspired vocal writing resulted in an absorbing, appealing soundworld.

Director Janice Muller made a virtue of simplicity. Using only a few props, Charles Davis's period costumes and Matt Cox's atmospheric, predominantly spotlit lighting designs, she ensured each scene made its impact before swiftly moving on. This kept the focus on the action while simultaneously capturing its intensifying power.

Inventive, engaging, stimulating and moving, *Biographica* is an outstanding new opera.

It deserves regular performances as well as a permanent place in the repertory.

Biographica. By Mary Finsterer. Sydney Chamber Opera. Ensemble Offspring. Sydney Festival. Director: Janice Muller. Conductor: Jack Symonds. Carriageworks, January 7. Tickets: \$41-\$46. Bookings: 1300 723 038 or online. Duration: 90 mins, no interval. Until Friday.

Biographica review: Mary Finsterer and Tom Wright's story of Gerolamo Cardano.

Peter McCallum



Expressive force: Jessica O'Donoghue

Sydney Festival: *Biographica*.

Sydney Chamber Opera, Ensemble Offspring.

Carriageworks. January 7

Reviewed by Peter McCallum

★ ★ ★ ★

To the Renaissance mind, music was not so much an art form as a cosmology, combining with arithmetic, geometry and astronomy to make the quadrivium of liberal arts considered essential to higher thought.

Heard music was but a manifestation of the harmony of body and soul, and of the universe.

Composer Mary Finsterer and librettist Tom Wright revive this ancient affinity for the modern age in their opera, *Biographica*, a meditation on the 16th century mathematician and physician Gerolamo Cardano.

The work juxtaposes his lofty intellectual world and far-reaching professional influence, with his messy, flawed family life, to create an image of humanity's contradictions.

Rather than write pastiche Renaissance polyphony, Finsterer's score recreates the Renaissance sound world with modern musical codes, using imaginative instrumentation, scattered modernist textures, and instrumental figuration of the sort exploited by minimalist Michael Nyman, to animate, transform and sometimes subvert the glistening vocal sonorities from an outstanding cast of singers.

Its most musically interesting elements are Finsterer's ear for original, dramatically appropriate instrumental and vocal combinations and the way musical processes intersect with mathematical ones, in a collision of the sensual and the rational.

Although the story dwells in the realm of the mind, there is an instinct for narrative and refreshing the dramatic tone at key moments with new sounds and situations.

The opening scene, *Horoscope*, creates an arresting and imposing opening using gongs, beautifully edged concordant vocal harmony and splashes of chaotic colour from the instruments.

In Scene VIII, *Lock of Combinations*, the chorus "explains" the mathematics behind Cardano's invention of the combination lock, in textures that spiral like intersecting spheres.

For the final scene, Finsterer recreates a Renaissance dance with raucous woodwind and percussion intrusions, like a grimly realistic dance of death.

Mitchell Butel, in the spoken part of Cardano, creates a sharply drawn, dark and deeply thoughtful persona of an ambitious intellect trying to survive in a world strung between the intrigues of the age of Machiavelli and the superstitions of the Inquisition.

Soprano Jane Sheldon as his mother, sings with focused convulsive expression of his caesarean birth in a plague year, reimagining the Renaissance and early Baroque arioso style, while Jessica O'Donoghue, creates a parallel moment of expressive force as his daughter dying of syphilis.

The third take on the fate of women is given to mezzo soprano Anna Fraser, poisoned by the son Giambattista. Simon Lobelson, in this role and as the ailing archbishop sings with firm smoothness while tenor Andrew Goodwin as the kleptomaniac other son, Aldo, sustains pure expressive tonal evenness.

Janice Muller's direction is simple, direct and effectively lit by Matt Cox. The AV blend could have tolerated more edge in the amplified spoken word to cut through the swirling musical sounds that always threatens to overwhelm their rationality.

Conductor Jack Symonds controlled the balance of iridescent purity and gritty noise in the sound to create an aural equivalent reminiscent of Oscar Wilde's image of a person lying in the gutter staring at the stars.

Biographica

Theatre

[Add review](#)

Sydney Chamber Opera kick off their year with a new Australian opera based on the life of Renaissance polymath Gerolamo Cardano

Few really good plays have ever been written about scientists, so a new opera about a 16th century mathematician was always a courageous venture for [Sydney Festival](#). How many people would go to Carriageworks hoping to hear binomial coefficients sung?

Fortunately Gerolamo Cardano (1501-76) was no pencil-pushing nerd: he didn't just contribute to probability theory, he gambled and fought with criminals, and was also an innovative physician. There was plenty of drama in the life of this Italian early-Renaissance man, and it's presented beautifully here.

Mary Finsterer's *Biographica* is structured not as a strictly chronological plot but rather a sequence of 12 scenes, some dealing with specific events such as births, illnesses and deaths, others more like reflections on Cardano's big concerns: humanity and the cosmos.

Astonishingly engaging is Scene VIII, a description of a combination lock invented by Cardano, in terms precise enough for a patent application, sung with clockwork accuracy and dynamo power, together with finely illustrated animated projections by James Brown. This now commonplace device becomes an object lesson on abstract numbers determining physical reality, and resonates in our period of smartphones and Wikileaks. The polymath Cardano also pioneered many basic theoretical concepts that became indispensable in modern engineering, including negative and imaginary numbers.

Tom Wright's gutsy yet finely crafted English and Latin libretto booms through five excellent soloists: Jane Sheldon, Simon Lobelson, Andrew Goodwin, Anna Fraser and Jessica O'Donoghue. Every one of these is worth lining up early for – so you can get a seat close to the stage; you may be amazed by the strength and quality of these voices.

The main role of Cardano is spoken not sung, but Mitchell Butel acts it so well that we feel we are joining him in a critical review of a life that was extraordinary while far from perfect; sharing his struggle to make sense of a harsh and complex world that is changing in ways that are creative and destructive. Cardano's worldview now seems half-recognisable, half-weird: one foot is in the 16th century, with its earnest astrology, primitive bloodletting and superstitious humours, but the other is advancing towards now-routine principles in science and medicine.

By analogy, the composer Finsterer draws deep from the medieval minstrel origins of Renaissance music, but links up with intervening periods and contemporary art music styles, delivering highly appealing yet substantive fabrics for every scene. It succeeds paradoxically by being both palatable and unsettling, like the tale it carries.

Conductor Jack Symonds executed Finsterer's score precisely with his proven Sydney Chamber Opera players; eminent guests from Ensemble Offspring, including Claire Edwards and Zubin Kanga, raised the number of instrumentalists to not even a dozen, yet the vast space of Bay 20 was filled with profoundly impressive sounds.

A triumphant level of achievement is what Sydney has come to routinely expect from the SCO; this premiere of a much-anticipated work by a professor from Monash University shows they are now a significant national cultural asset.

Director Janice Muller and designer Charles Davis bestowed the 12 tableaux with a Rembrandt look at Target prices, delivering a highly memorable, even haunting experience.

This is an exemplary achievement for the Sydney Festival: new, fresh high art that will be enjoyed by a wider audience than any accountant would have predicted.

By: Jason Catlett

Posted: Tuesday January 10 2017