

## Elliott GYGER (born 1968)

Deep and dissolving verticals of light: nocturnal concerto for orchestra [1994]

Deep and dissolving verticals of light: nocturnal concerto for orchestra [1994]Deep and dissolving verticals of light  
Ferry the falls of moonshine down. Five bells  
Coldly rung out in a machine's voice. Night and water  
Pour to one rip of darkness, the Harbour floats  
In air, the Cross hangs upside-down in water.

These lines come from Kenneth Slessor's poem Five Bells, an elegy to a friend who drowned one night in Sydney Harbour in the 1920s. This event and its eerie nocturnal maritime setting frame Slessor's desperate search for meaning from the life of 'Joe', now only existing in his transient memory, unable to find anchor in the relativity of time. The life of the deceased is recalled in an intense moment, concentrated between the ringing of a ship's five bells. Australian composer Elliott Gyger has a firsthand understanding of the Sydney Harbour so beautifully captured by Slessor, having grown up on its shore. Gyger composed a full setting of Five Bells in 1990 for a cappella vocal sextet, but continued to be drawn to the sound world of the Harbour and in 1994 he completed this work, Deep and dissolving verticals of light, for orchestra - without words, but still very much tied to Slessor's poem.

Gyger's work is subtitled a nocturnal concerto for orchestra, and he is adventurous in his use of space and the idea of interaction which is inherent in concerto form. Six pairs of soloists from the ensemble are put in various different locations in relation to the rest of the orchestra, creating a sound world of unusual depth and layering, reflecting the mysterious darkness of the Harbour at night. Behind all this, the form is of one big arch, with a single line of pitch discernible ascending to the halfway point then returning to the depths. This is in contrast to the more through-composed dramatic structure: as each concertante duo enters, we are given another layer of perspective on the aural 'harbourscape' - the horn and cello portraying the distant whistles of boats, the trumpet and vibraphone suggesting the reflection of the Southern Cross in the water. These layers begin to overlap and grow in detail, matching the heightening desperation of the poem. Gyger says, 'it's as if the narrator is looking out the window at the vast empty space of the harbour at night, and little by little the sights and sounds trigger memories, which proliferate to the point of becoming overwhelming.' A moment of agonising intensity is reached, but we can go no further, and five bells call us back to reality from our timeless, dream-like state.

Since this work's 1997 premiere by the Sydney Symphony, Elliott Gyger - the composition tutor at this year's National Music Camp - has been very active as a composer. He obtained a Ph.D. in music from Harvard University in 2002 and held the position of Assistant Professor of Music at Harvard until 2007. He is now a Lecturer in Composition at the University of Melbourne.

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