

P E R F O R M I N G A R T S



In tune with nature at Ngeringa

Perched on the slopes overlooking Mount Barker Summit is an object that might as well have been dropped from the skies by a benevolent alien spaceship: Ngeringa Cultural Centre.

-BY GRAHAM STRAHLE-

Reportedly costing \$7.5 million, it is a hexagon-shaped building with a 10-metre tall domed ceiling and designed solely for chamber music. Ngeringa Cultural Centre (NCC), an entrant in the 2016 Australian Institute of Architects SA Architecture Awards, is a marvel as anyone who has seen it will know. But just as impressive is what's going on inside its acoustically-tuned interior.

In addition to its chamber concert series that continues from past years, the centre will be inviting leading musicians from around the country to come in and curate 'Ngeringa 24' weekend events. They will have complete say over choice of music and performers in a cluster of concerts that mark the diurnal cycle from 'daytime' in the morning to 'owl light' in the evening. Recorder virtuoso Genevieve Lacey is running the first of these weekends in April.

One model for comparison is the Lockenhaus Chamber Music Festival in Austria, which NCC's founder Ulrike Klein and general manager Alison Beare are keen to visit in July. In the 1980s Lockenhaus became internationally renowned under the guiding

hand of violinist Gidon Kremer. "He invited the musicians he personally wanted to collaborate with so they could have the joy and freedom to create together in the moment," Beare says.

"He never announced the program in advance, just a list of artists and a list of composers accompanied by a detailed explanation of the program's overarching theme. It's important for us to understand what's happening globally, so we will also attend the Verbier Festival in the Swiss Alps. We want to hear new artists, experience new events and be open to external influences as we begin to shape the future direction of Ngeringa Arts."

Under a high-powered national advisory board, Ngeringa is also planning reciprocal arrangements with the Australian National Academy of Music and Melbourne Recital Centre to bring out "high profile international artists" in 2018, and has already begun co-commissioning new works with interstate festivals including the Port Fairy Spring Music Festival.

It all sounds visionary, and with resources to back it up, the plans underway at Ngeringa

are nothing less than breathtaking for a state so used to seeing the arts being steadily whittled away. Interstate musicians seem pretty blown away by it too. Lacey says that when she first heard about NCC, she and her colleagues "could not quite believe what we were hearing".

About a year ago she was invited to join the centre's advisory board and contribute to its blue-sky thinking.

"We were given things to think about in advance, and in essence it was to come up with a vision for this place for the next 50 years," Lacey says. "What a beautiful question to be asked. We were asked where are the gaps, what are the things Ngeringa can support. Musicians are used to thinking about the next month or perhaps year, but this kind of conversation was radical and energising."

As curator and performer in the inaugural Ngeringa 24, Lacey is assembling a highly diverse group of artists that includes harpist Marshall McGuire, guitarist Karin Schaupp, cellist Umberto Clerici, jazz trumpeter Phil Slater, writer Chloe Hooper and filmmaker Sera Davies. Music will range from the 14th

century to contemporary improvisation. The most 'standard' piece, she says, will be a Schubert sonata for cello and piano, but this will be arranged for guitar, so even familiar music will have a sense of discovery.

Mary Vallentine, chief executive officer of the Melbourne Recital Centre (MRC) and also a member of Ngeringa's advisory board, describes Ngeringa as "an incredibly significant investment". As a fine music destination she thinks it is in a similar league to the Four Winds Festival in Bermagui, NSW.

"Absolutely it is about a celebration of the arts we have and enjoy in Australia, the environment we value, and the respect we have for an artform in which musicians are rewarded for what they give," says Vallentine. She believes, however, that Ngeringa may have no equal anywhere in the country. "It is underpinned by a really clear vision and values which you rarely hear, unhampered by commerciality. As a year-round music centre equipped with an residential studio where artists can develop their own projects, I think it is probably unique."

As far as acoustics go, she and Lacey agree its clear, warm sound is comparable with the MRC's Salon. It's no coincidence, because the same acoustic engineering firm, ARUP, was involved in the design of both buildings. Indeed, it was Vallentine who urged Klein to hire an acoustician in the first place - "there are a lot of pitfalls otherwise," she says.

Others on the advisory board are Marshall McGuire, Paul Dean, Tim Matthies, Colin Cornish, Greg Mackie and Amanda Duthie - all prominent names nationally in music and the arts. Duthie, director of Adelaide Film Festival, says Ngeringa is "a gift not just to South Australia but to the nation. Visually it is fantastic, but it is also a place to shut one's eyes and open one's ears".

While it is a music venue, Duthie is keen on exploring the centre's potential for film. "We were completely delighted to screen Scott Hicks' *Highly Strung* up there during the Film Festival; it is a really complex film about the nature of creativity that resonates with the building itself"

She sees Ngeringa as a flexible venue in tune with its environment. "It can shift to anything, both on the inside and outside, so it can encompass a whole range of artists and demonstrate how we engage in different ways with nature. It is not just a building but a garden. To have filmmaker Sera Davies involved in the first Ngeringa 24 is so smart, and I think Genevieve as curator is sensitive to all these layers. It's incredibly exciting."



Ngeringa 24
Saturday, April 23 and Sunday, April 24
Ngeringa Cultural Centre
ngeringaarts.com