

Sally Whitwell: Making music outside the lines

Fresh from touring China and Mongolia with two children's choirs, Sydney-based musician and composer, Sally Whitwell recently spent two days in Dubbo collaborating on a new multi-arts project. DUBBO WEEKENDER caught up with her to find out more about this album-producing artist who doesn't let her love of classical music box her in. AS TOLD TO and PHOTOGRAPHY Kim V. Goldsmith

IT'S been a big year of firsts for the dynamic Sally Whitwell. Along with the release of her fourth album with ABC Classics, her first of only her music, she's also penning her first musical for Sydney Philharmonia Choirs and working in Dubbo on multi-arts production, The Chapel Project.

In between these commitments, she rehearses, composes, accompanies and fits in a myriad other creative activities; her energy coming from the people she works with.

During a quieter moment between the workshops Whitwell tells Kim V. Goldsmith about what drives her: **You've just returned from Mongolia and China, and you've also travelled to other parts of the world including Europe - is there a commonality among the people you work with across the world?**

I generally find you have to lead some people on to an idea because they just don't have the confidence. No one has come along and told them they're an extraordinary individual and you can do this thing. So, for some it takes more...something I find I have to do with less experienced people. If they have a little bit of experience in writing a tune, or a pop song or even a poem they tend to have stronger opinions and that gives me something to work with.

Your here with your composer hat on with The Chapel Project - is part of your job to bring out the inner creative in people?

I do a lot of that in my life and you just can't know what you're going to get.

As much as I'd like to say these are my techniques and this is my arsenal - you can't! People are people and they're variable.

What's that unknown mean to the creative process?

It just means you have to be brave. I have to be brave myself because I don't know what I'm going to get and I have to be able to think on the spot and think of something. I generally translate things into my own language but if I can find another way to make it more their language than mine, that's what I try to do. **Your language is very refined though from 20 odd years of practice, study and immersing yourself in what you do. Is it that strong skill set that helps you get through these situations?**

The most important skills I have are the music theory I did - harmony and counterpoint aural studies...all that dry theoretical stuff, which you practise and practise and practise to the point where it's just completely natural to you to make music in a particular way. My way of music is notated. It's mostly written down, but to get there I do a lot of improvisation. But I couldn't do any of those things if I didn't have the theory and aural training. **You work with a lot of young people - is that message of a strong foundation something you find yourself imparting all the time?**

Yes and no. The children I work with at

Sydney Children's Choir and Gondwana Choirs, they already know that because we tell them every two minutes how important it is and they can't progress to do fun, amazing stuff unless they have that theory. Kids outside that realm often don't understand that it's your building block...you're not even doing music unless you have your building blocks. I worry because I see music schools not prioritising building block type study. I wonder what these kids are getting in their degrees.

What made you want to pursue this path and to put the hard work into learning the theory?

I just always really like theory, which is a really girly-swat thing to say (grinning)! It was always my best subject at university. I always knew I'd be in music but I didn't know how. I thought I'd do my first degree in bassoon, which was great because I got to play in an orchestra and got to see how an orchestra works and how it all fits together...and how woodwind players think, which is different.

I got to the end of that degree and it wasn't for me...I kind of floated around the world a bit wondering what I'd do next, when I decided as I'd always played the piano pretty well, I'd do a degree in accompaniment and then try and get some work as an accompanist. That's basically what I did.

Has classical been your favourite genre from day one?

Yeah...but I like doing other things - I'm writing some pop songs at the moment with various people, so that's a new adventure for me.

I just like to try things I haven't tried before.

You're an accompanist and that requires you work with other people, but you also have a solo career - an album producing solo career...

I never set out to do that - they came to me. I like to play a lot of classical contemporary music and they saw me doing that.

When was that first album released?

It was 2011...I was totally not expecting that. **So four albums later is it something you're still not expecting?**

No, you can't rely on it. That would be arrogant. **In contemporary culture, some might think that once you've released your fourth album you're pretty much on a rise and you have a stellar career. Is it different in a classical world?**

I've only done one album of my own music. Unlike the contemporary world, in the classical world you don't do that.

Why is that? Is it difficult?

I don't know why...but with new music there's a resistance. If you look on the classical charts, it's heavily concentrated on the nineteenth century, which I find kind of extraordinary. There are pockets of new - you'll see alongside my stuff, people like Max Richter and his Vivaldi recomposed, Ólafur Arnalds, those kind of crossover



people...Jonny Greenwood, who's with Radiohead, but wrote that fabulous soundtrack to There Will Be Blood. **Where does Dubbo's The Chapel Project fit into the scheme of things, in terms of your practice?**

I just like to try new things. I think it keeps it interesting. I just need to know I could do it and I could learn some new things and find a different way to approach things in the future...but you'll never, never know if you never, never go.

**Kim V. Goldsmith is the artist behind The Chapel Project*

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