Audio Description Pre-Show Notes: Simone Young Conducts Mozart and Bach

These pre-show notes are provided by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra in collaboration with the Accessibility team at the Sydney Opera House.

The Venue

This performance by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra takes place in the Concert Hall. The Concert Hall sits inside the Sydney Opera House's largest set of white, sail-shaped "shells" on the western half of its box-like granite "Podium".

The Sydney Opera House is entered from the covered opening underneath the "Monumental Steps" that stretch across the southern end of the Podium. Once inside, the venue is up two flights of internal stairs, through the Box Office level and the theatre's Southern Foyer, a light-filled space enclosed by expansive concrete and glass structures.

The Concert Hall itself is the largest and grandest internal venue at the Sydney Opera House, seating over 2,600 people in tiered seating rows which are divided into separate, walled sections that surround a low, open stage or "platform".

These sections include the Stalls lower down and closer to the Stage, the Upper and Lower Circles raised up behind the Stalls, and the rectangular boxes stretching along each side of the Stage and Stalls at the same height as the Circle. Directly behind the stage are the stepped rows of Choir Stall seating.

The Concert Hall has a light and warm atmosphere, almost every surface made of timber. The walls and floor are a deep, honey-coloured brush box, with a unique timber pattern based on the soundwaves created by a middle C. This pattern, like the ripples on a pond, helps diffuse the sound to all parts of the hall equally.

The seat frames and ceiling are made of a lighter, cream-coloured white birch. Bright magenta or purplish-pink upholstery on the seats creates a sea of vibrant colour throughout the space.

The vaulted ceiling of the Concert Hall reaches its highest point around 30 metres directly above the stage, culminating in a circular section known as the Crown. Angular segments radiate out from the Crown, stretching over the audience before cascading down to meet the edges of the space, almost reaching the seats in the very back row of the Circle.

Suspended from the crown are 18 large fiberglass acoustic reflectors, shaped like petals. They are the same vibrant magenta colour as the seats and have a glossy sheen that reflects parts of the stage below.

The height and angle of these "petals" can be adjusted to reflect sound back to performers on stage. For an orchestral performance, they are often arranged in a horizontal layer about halfway between the stage and the Crown.

Situated high above the stage is the Grand Organ, the largest mechanical-action organ in the world. The visible pipes and bells of the organ's façade are housed in rectangular recessed cabinets, arranged in a stepping pyramid pattern that spans the wall above the Choir Stall.

The Stage and Instruments

The golden brush box floor of the Concert Hall stage is segmented in a concentric semi-circular formation of height adjustable "stage risers". When all the risers are level with the stage, they create a rainbow-shaped pattern of arcs on the floor.

For an orchestral performance, the risers are arranged into tiered sections to allow unobstructed views between the orchestra, conductor and audience.

All of the pieces in this concert are for a chamber orchestra of about 35-40 musicians. Smaller than a full symphony orchestra, the chamber orchestra covers half of the stage area across 3 different height levels.

The central semi-circle riser is level with the stage. The Conductor is at the front and centre, facing the orchestra with their back to the audience. Tiered sections fan out from this central point. The middle tier sits 20cm above stage level, and is only deep enough to fit one row of musicians. The outer tier is twice the height of the middle tier, and takes up the rest of the stage area.

The Strings make up most of the chamber orchestra, filling the central semi-circle around the Conductor and climbing up the risers to either side at the front. Curving around from left to right, the First Violins sit closest to the front left of the stage, with Second Violins and Violas in the centre. The Cellos and Double Basses sit closest to the front right, with Cellos at stage level and Double Basses behind them on the middle tier.

Woodwind, Brass, and Percussion are arranged across the middle and outer tiers at the back of the formation. A small Woodwind section sits on the middle tier just behind the Second Violins and Violas. On the righthand side of the outer tier are the Timpani, 3 or 4 large, tuned drums in a small arc around a player. Directly to the left of the Timpani sits a short row of Trumpets.

Some of the players and instruments on stage will change between the 2 halves of this concert.

First Half: Macens and Bach, featuring Simone Young on the harpsichord

Please note the Macens piece does not appear in the Friday performance.

The Woodwind and Brass sections are sparse for this half of the concert, consisting of only 2 Oboes and 3 Trumpets.

Ella Macens' *Before Me, There Was You* and JS Bach's Suite No.3 both feature a harpsichord, which will be played by Conductor Simone Young.

For this first half of the concert, the harpsichord is placed at the front and centre instead of a conductor's podium. Its keyboard end points toward the audience, and its body points in toward the centre of the orchestra, surrounded by the Strings. Simone Young will be seated on a piano stool, playing and leading the orchestra with her back to the audience.

The Ruckers Double Harpsichord

The harpsichord is a stringed keyboard instrument. It looks similar to a grand piano, although it is smaller and produces sound in a different way. Whilst a piano uses "hammers" to strike its strings, the harpsichord has "plectrums" that pluck the strings when keys are pressed. This creates its distinctive crisp, bright, and twangy sound.

The instrument played in this concert is the Ruckers Double Harpsichord, made by Carey Beebe in Sydney in 2003. It has been supplied by Carey Beebe Harpsichords.

The Ruckers Double Harpsichord is made and decorated in the style of a 17th Century Dutch harpsichord, with a modern Australian twist. The instrument is housed in a boxy timber case, painted dark green with gilded mouldings along the edges. It is asymmetrical, its righthand edge curving inward and tapering to a narrow, pointed tip opposite the wider keyboard end. The case is supported on a stand of turned timber legs which look like the legs of an antique table. The top of the case is a flat lid, with a hinge along the straight lefthand edge. Whilst playing, the lid is propped open with a long wooden rod.

Inside the tapered body of the case is the soundboard, a horizontal panel of light-coloured wood over which sets of strings are stretched. Two thin wooden bridges sweep across the soundboard, separating it into 3 irregular curved sections.

Artist Diana Ford has painted the soundboard in an antique style, using Australian floral motifs. Each section is bordered in blue, a dainty scalloped edge punctuated by pointed clusters of arabesque tendrils. Filling each section is a multi-coloured collection of flower and foliage specimens, like illustrations from an old botany book. Bottlebrush, wattle, kangaroo paw, flannel flower, lilly pilly, Sturt's desert pea, and many others.

In the left corner of the soundboard's wider end is a "rose", a decorative gilded disk set into a circular cut-out. Painted around the rose is a wreath of gum leaves and blossoms.

The Ruckers Double Harpsichord has 2 keyboards, stacked one on top of the other in a step-like manner. The colouring of the keys is inverted compared to a normal piano keyboard – the long keys are black, whilst the shorter, sharp and flat keys are white. The three inner case walls around the keyboard are painted with a tiled arabesque pattern of curling black and white.

Second Half: Mozart

For Mozart's Symphony No.39, the harpsichord is removed from the stage and replaced with a conductor's podium. Simone Young will stand on the podium to conduct the orchestra, her back still facing the audience.

The Woodwind section is expanded, with the Oboes being replaced by a Flute, 2 Clarinets, and 2 Bassoons (as seated from left to right). In the Brass section, the row of Trumpets is reduced by one, but two Horns are added to the outer tier behind the Flute.

The Performers

Simone Young, Conductor and Harpsichord Player

Simone Young is an Australian woman with Irish and Croatian ancestry and describes herself as having a Mediterranean appearance. She is in her 60s, with an average height and athletic build. She has light skin and blue eyes. Her long brunette hair is often worn loose, flowing over her back and shoulders.

When conducting, Simone Young tends to wear loose-fitting black tunics over black pants.

Her conducting style is precise and graceful, infusing clear directions with the emotion of the music. When conducting from the podium, she often uses both arms, holding the baton in her right hand and mirroring its movements with her left. Her arms bounce, roll, and flow in time with the music. She tends to stand on one spot throughout but lets the music move through her body in subtle, rhythmic ways. She might sway gently or lean in toward the orchestra. She might bounce with her knees or heels. She might shift her weight between her feet or lift herself up to full height on her toes as the music changes.

To lead the orchestra while playing the harpsichord, Simone Young will gesture with her head and body and will also communicate through facial expressions. She may also conduct with her hands during moments when she is not playing on the keyboard.

The Sydney Symphony Orchestra

The Sydney Symphony Orchestra, or SSO, is a large and diverse group of musicians. About 75 musicians will take part in this performance, although not all of them will be on stage for every piece.

For the daytime performances on Friday and Sunday, the men will be wearing black suits and ties with white shirts, and the women will be wearing black dresses.

For the evening performance on Saturday, the musicians will be dressed in formal concert attire. The men will be in “white tie”, wearing a black tailcoat suit with crisp white shirt and bow tie. The women will wear a mixture of formal black dresses, skirts, dress pants and blouses.