

ABOUT THE MUSIC

The Beauty of Collaboration

Katie Noonan spoke to Aaron Curran about creativity and connection

For Katie Noonan, returning to the Sydney Opera House to perform with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra is a bit like coming home. Her ties to the orchestra go right back to the earliest days of her career, and she was a regular visitor to the venue months before she was even born.

'I've got so many beautiful memories of working with the SSO', she recalls. 'My first time ever performing at the Opera House was with the orchestra and my band George and the wonderful Mr Jon Lord, organist with Deep Purple. Somehow he had found out about us and we became the first band in the world to perform his *Concerto for Group and Orchestra* other than Deep Purple. That was wild, three or four sold-out nights, and such an incredible way to begin our history together. Also shooting

a promotional clip for the Sydney Opera House, a version of Nick Cave's 'The Ship Song'. The day they filmed my segment with the SSO was the day 'La Stupenda' passed away – Dame Joan Sutherland – so that was an incredible moment, to be singing where Australia's finest opera singer had created her music, and where she played her farewell performances. So they are two particularly fervent memories. But actually my earliest visit to the Opera House started in 1977 because my mum was performing (Britten's) *Albert Herring* with Opera Australia. I was still in utero! Weirdly I think my experiences in Mum's womb might have set my musical interests in motion, as the next week she took my brother to see ABBA perform live at the Sydney Showgrounds. Those two events seem to mark out what I love most in music –

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great pop and amazing classical music. I was the daggy kid at school who adored listening to Vivaldi and Bach, as much as I loved Annie Lennox and Crowded House.'

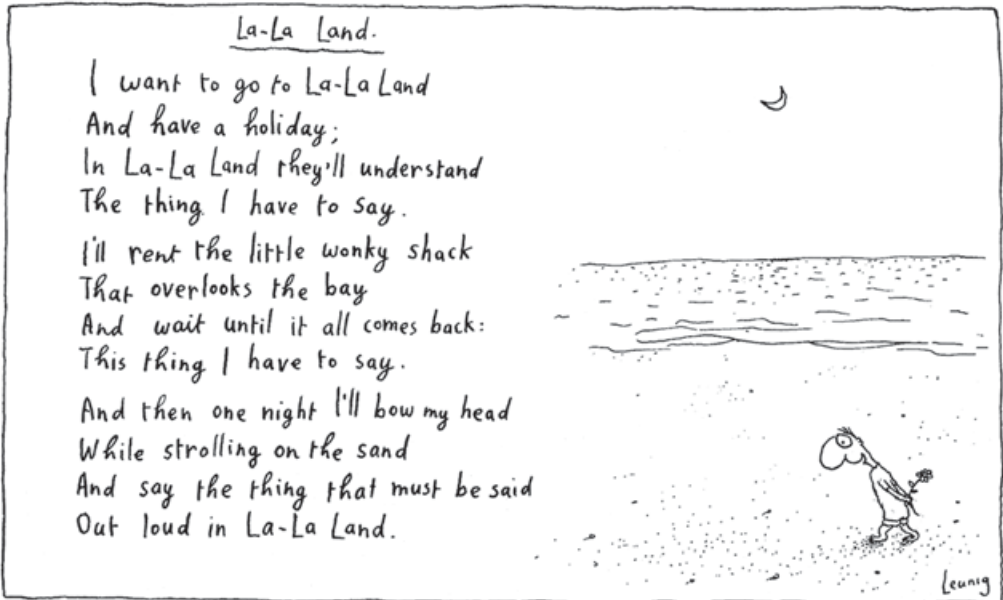
Noonan will put her love of different musical forms to best use when she and her group Elixir join artist-writer Michael Leunig, conductor Iain Grandage and some of Australia's finest orchestral players on the *Gratitude and Grief* tour, performing music that will soon be released as Elixir's third studio album.

'Elixir is very special to me, it's my longest continuous band,' she says. 'We started in 1997, so we've been together 20 years, my whole career in fact. My husband Zac's in the band too, and it's an important part of our relationship to make music together, as well as being parents and lovers and all the rest of it. Elixir has always been about celebrating great Australian poetry. We love working with poets that we admire, particularly older writers who have lived more years than us and have their own unique perspectives on life. This is our third album where we've worked with an incredible Australian writer. Our first was with Martin Challis, our second with Thomas

Chapcott, and now this new one is with the incredible Michael Leunig, who's one of the sweetest souls I've ever met. He feels like a band member, not just a guest.'

Katie was introduced to Leunig by Richard Tognetti, after he came to see her perform with the Australian Chamber Orchestra. 'When I first met Michael I felt like I'd met a real kindred spirit. I was pretty overcome because I'm a massive fan. I think every musician I know has something by Leunig in their home, whether a framed quote or a cartoon. The intimacy and sense of home, love and compassion that are in Michael's words and artworks feel like such a welcoming space to make music in. Though he's famous, I still think he's a much underrated writer. He has the capacity to say so much with so few words. That is such an amazing skill in poetry but also for song lyrics, to say a lot with little. It's such a privilege to sing what he writes.'

Noonan explains that the process of writing songs with Leunig started out as a long-distance activity but, serendipitously, things gradually came together in person. 'The process was for the three of us in Elixir to get together and start





jamming, with me surrounded by pages of Michael's words, and to see where our ideas connected. But both times when we were ready to do demo recordings of the songs, he was right there with us in the studio. Totally unplanned actually, the first time was in Melbourne, and then recently up in Queensland, he appeared at a poetry festival and we saw each other there. I didn't even know he was going to be there but I said, 'Hey we're in the studio tomorrow, do you want to come?' Luckily he had a day off. I told him I still needed an extra verse to complete one song and he wrote it for me then and there. He said it was like being in the newsroom, on deadline, needing to go straight to print!

'Given a lot of Michael's poems are quite short, I had to ask him to extrapolate and flesh out some themes a little more,' she explains, 'and he wrote those lyrics directly into my songbook with his distinctive handwriting, so now that's a treasured memento for me. I read his words straight from his own pen and

we recorded them immediately, as soon as he'd written them. One of our songs is called 'Gratitude and Grief', these seemed like the right sentiments to sum up the whole body of work. In the last few years, I've been through periods of grief and have taken a lot of solace from Michael's words. I wrote a song called 'Gratitude' on my last album too, which is about the sadness of burying someone you love but the joy that comes from paying tribute to them and what they've given you in life. Times like that are deeply sad but also allow you to give thanks for what you've shared.'

'It's interesting, you know, music's a weird force. You make music and you choose words and put them together but sometimes it's not till much later that you really understand what they're about. My father has been very sick lately and the song we wrote with Michael, 'Gratitude and Grief', not only describes what I've been feeling lately, but it's like the universe has wanted me to have this song to help deal

with things. Our work with Leunig has become a real joy and solace. I connect with his words and themes because he's such a beautiful soul. Collaborating was just meant to be.'

The two words Noonan uses most often in this interview are 'beautiful' and 'collaboration' – the essential qualities she looks for in joining others to make music. 'Our arrangers, Iain Grandage and Steve Newcomb, are just amazing beautiful men, and are people that we love. Iain will be conducting too, he's a stellar musician and was a cellist first before becoming known as a composer and arranger. He's also an incredibly nice human being. So if he's the fifth band member for this project, then Stevie Newcomb is the sixth. Steve worked on our last Elixir album (*First Seed Ripening*) and we actually studied together at the (Queensland) Conservatorium, we grew up

together as little jazz babies, right back when Elixir was just starting.'

'The older I get, the more I realise I only want to work with people that I like personally. Life is too short to work with arseholes,' she adds laughing. 'Especially sharing music. You need to be in a place of trust with the people you play with...music can expose your vulnerabilities, your frailties and uncertainties, so you need to feel like those playing with you have got your back.'

For Katie, musical collaboration is also about learning, growth and getting the best possible introduction to different forms of creativity that can inspire and challenge her. 'I particularly love working with artists that create in a different form or vernacular, like Rafael Bonachela at Sydney Dance Company or Yaron Lifschitz of Circa,' she explains. 'I love

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Finding her own voice

I started an opera degree, and though I loved it I soon realised I didn't love it enough to make it the sole focus of my musical career, which you have to do, of course – singing opera takes a tremendous amount of work. You have to live and breathe it. I was more interested in trying to find my own voice as a performer and songwriter. All of my heroes are people who don't sound like anyone else, whether that be Uncle Archie Roach or Björk. I think opera can be more about the art of imitation, of trying to achieve a notion of perfection that someone else has defined, rather than creating original sounds. That didn't appeal as much to me. I'm not an actor, I'm only comfortable being myself onstage and trying to be as honest as possible.

Katie Noonan



throwing myself in at the deep end and working with artists that have something different to teach me, like Richard Tognetti and Bill Henson on the ACO's *Luminous* project, that was special, Bill is equally as passionate about what he does but in a language and form that's new to me, so that was just fascinating. Blurring the boundaries of genre is my favourite thing. Also fear can be a powerful force in making art: touring *Les Illuminations* with Raf and Sydney Dance Company, I sang a Benjamin Britten work; halfway through learning the piece, I thought, 'Holy crap, this is really difficult, what have I let myself in for?' I was so scared I couldn't pull it off. But you grow best when you stretch yourself and find new strengths you didn't know you had. The most interesting stuff happens when you're scared shitless and learning at a furious pace. Art loves challenge, and work of great merit can follow.'

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