

# DIASPORA TWILIGHT SERIES 1 : “The Rig Veda”

6pm, Tuesday 14 May 2013

Ian Hanger Recital Hall

The ancient texts of the Rig-Veda date from 1200-900 BC and are considered among the oldest religious writings in the world. Hymns of praise and thanksgiving, Rig-Veda literally translates “to praise, verse, and knowledge”. They were written by the Aryans during the Harappan Civilization and are the cornerstone of Hindu thought and belief to this day. In the Veda collection there are over 1000 hymns written in Sanskrit. Of the Vedas, the Sama-Veda is often referred to as one of the wellsprings of Indian music, but the Rig-Veda centres on the Gods, including praises, blessings, sacrifices, and curses. Because they are poetic in format, they can be chanted quite readily, and have been handed down in this manner for many centuries.

## 1. Traditional Vedic chants

Ritwik Sanyal, *dhrupad voice*

## 2. Leah BARCLAY (b.1985).....*Vedic Remnants (2013)* Electroacoustic composition

Vedic Remnants is an exploration and contemporary translation of the Athirathram, an enduring cultural ritual from Kerala, South India. This 3000-year-old Vedic ritual is believed to be the oldest surviving ritual of mankind and consists of Vedic chanting allegedly derived from birdsong. It is believed the Athirathram purifies the atmosphere and the Vedic chants transform the natural environment through sound. This unbroken tradition is now at risk, with only three Nambudiri Brahmin families in Kerala holding the sacred knowledge to conduct the ritual.

My composition is the result of two years research and development initiated through the REMNANT/EMERGENCY Artlab in collaboration with the local communities of the Athirathram (supported by the Australia Council for the Arts). The work recreates elements of the ritual through sound and ceremony and investigates the validity of enduring cultural rituals in contemporary society. All of the source material is derived from field recordings on location at the ritual sites, interviews and recording sessions conducted during research trips from 2011 to 2013.

The project explores the value of contemporary performance in the preservation and translation of this ritual and also highlights the challenges of working in complex intercultural collaborations. This creative exploration of the Athirathram is underpinned by the agency of sound; the idea that sound can extend beyond purely expression and have a transformational effect on the natural environment.

This performance of Vedic Remnants, created for Encounters:India is a short prelude for the major work currently under development. In late 2013 this project will expand into an immersive multi-channel sound installation developed in collaboration with the communities in South India.

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**3. Greg SCHIEMER (b. 1949).....*Selections from Vedic Mass (1997)***  
for four unaccompanied female voices, in Sanskrit

Reka Csernyik and Svetlana Seaman, *sopranos*  
Jody Bell and Ruby Rousell, *mezzosopranos*  
Chris Bradley, *conductor*

In 1964, at the age of 15, Greg Schiemer entered a Catholic seminary to study for the priesthood. Two priests in the Passionist order instilled in him a love for music. He began to listen to music, notably Gregorian chant, and wrote his first musical compositions, which were mainly hymns and liturgical music. These were written at the cusp of the Second Vatican Council when the liturgy was moving from Latin to the vernacular. His first performed composition, a hymn to Saint Paul of the Cross, was occasionally sung by the novitiate choir.

Leaving the seminary, Greg Schiemer decided to follow a career in music. In 1968 he matriculated from Sydney Technical College and the following year went to Sydney University and studied with Peter Sculthorpe, his first formal teacher in composition.

In 1984 Schiemer visited India and later, whilst staying in Bombay, he married in a Hindu ceremony. In a sense, then, the Vedic Mass brings together the two spiritual strands of his life.

Scored for four unaccompanied female voices (two sopranos and two mezzosopranos), the Vedic Mass was written in 1997 for the ensemble Voiceworks and its musical director, the composer-pianist Graham Hair.

The text for this work - in romanised Sanskrit - is from a contemporary Catholic Mass text created by Dom Bede Griffiths for use in liturgies of the Saccidananda ashram at Shantivanam, in Tamil Nadu, in southern India. Griffiths, an English Benedictine priest, was responsible for building a bridge between two religious traditions - one based on Judaic, the other on Vedic revelation. A former student of C.S. Lewis, Griffiths found in India the same spirit that inspired early Western monasticism. His scholarship embraced learning Sanskrit to study the Vedas and the Upanishads. He adopted an Indian way of life and eventually took on the robes of a sanyassa - or Eastern holy man - and in 1973 established the Saccidananda ashram where he lived until his death twenty years later.

The Saccidananda ashram was a community where people from different faith traditions could meet and pray, growing together towards the unity in truth which is at the heart of all religions. For Griffiths, truth was to be found in a "meeting of opposites": of East and West, of masculine and feminine, of the rational and the intuitive. His writings, published by HarperCollins, include *The Golden Thread*, *The Marriage of East and West* and *Return to the Centre*.

Today, Greg Schiemer is best known as an Australian electronic music composer and musical instrument designer. Since the early 1970s his work has involved design of new interactive analog and digital instruments, much of it in collaboration with dance. During the 1980s and 1990s, he produced public radio events involving live audience interaction. These included such events as the Concert on Bicycles - where audience members rode bicycles during a radio broadcast in order to experience the effect of multiple moving sound sources. In another such event, *The Talk Back Piano*, a computer-controlled piano responds to sounds made by a large national radio audience during a live broadcast. *The Pocket Gamelan*, developed with support from the Australian Research Council, is a network of java phones programmed to play music using tunings found in many parts of the world.

Greg Schiemer is currently Adjunct Professor of Music at the University of Technology, Sydney. He was director of the Sonic Arts Research Network at the University of Wollongong; Visiting Associate Research Fellow at the Interactive and Digital Media Institute at the National University of Singapore; Australia Council Composition Fellow at CSIRO Division of Radiophysics, Epping; and Lecturer in Composition and Music Technology at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music. He was recently appointed Artistic Director of the Auroras Festival in Western Sydney.

4. Gustav HOLST (1874-1934).....Hymns from the 'Rig Veda' (1908-14)  
Third Group, H.98 No.3 (1909) for four-part female voices and harp

*Hymn to the Dawn*  
*Hymn to the Waters*  
*Hymn to Vena (The Sun Rising through the Mist)*  
*Hymn of the Travellers*

*I. Hymn to the Dawn*

Hear our hymn. O Goddess,  
Rich in wealth and wisdom,  
Ever young, yet ancient,  
True to Law Eternal.

Wak'ner of the songbirds  
Ensign of the Eternal.  
Draw thou near, O fair one.  
In they radiant chariot.

Bring to her your off'ring,  
Humbly bow before her.  
Raise your songs of welcome  
As she comes in splendor.

*II. Hymn to the Waters*

Flowing from the firmament  
Forth to the ocean.  
Healing all in earth and air,  
Never halting.

Indra, Lord of Heav'n,  
Formed their courses  
Indra's mighty laws  
Can never be broken.

Cleansing waters, flow ye on,  
Hasten and help us.

Lo, in the waters, dwelleth One,  
Knower of all on earth and sea  
Whose dread command no man shall shun,  
Varun, sou'ran Lord is He.

Onward, ye waters, onward,  
Cleansing waters, flow ye on,  
Hasten and help us.

Obey the ruler of the sky  
Who dug the path for you to run.

Flowing from the firmament  
Forth to the ocean.  
Healing all in earth and air,  
Never halting.

Indra, Lord of Heav'n,  
Formed their courses  
Indra's mighty laws  
Can never be broken.

*III. Hymn to Vena*  
(The Sun Rising through the Mist)

Vena comes, born of light,  
He drives the many-colour'd clouds onward.  
Here, where the sunlight and the waters mingle,  
Our songs float up and caress the new-born infant  
Vena comes

The child of cloud and mist  
appeareth on the ridge of the sky,  
He shines on the summit of creation.  
The hosts proclaim the glory of our Common Father,  
Vena comes

He hath come to the bosom of his beloved.  
Smiling on him,  
She beareth him the highest heav'n.  
With yearning heart  
On thee we gaze,  
O gold-wing'd messenger of mighty Gods.

Wise men see him in their libations  
As the sacrifice mounts to the eternal heights, mingling with our solemn chant.  
He stands erect in highest heav'n,  
Clad in noble raiment,  
Arm'd with shining weapons,  
Hurling light to the farthest region,  
Rejoicing in his radiant splendour.

*IV. Hymn of the Travellers*  
(The god invoked in this Hymn is the God of travellers, along the roads of this world and along that leading to the next.)

Go thou on before us  
Guide us on our way,  
Mighty One.  
Make our journey pleasant  
Never let us stray.

Wonder-worker hearken  
Come in thy splendor,  
Come in thy mighty power.

Trample on the wicked,  
All who would oppose,  
Mighty One.

Drive away the robber,  
Drive away our foes.

Wonder-worker hearken  
Come in thy splendor,  
Come in thy mighty power.

As we journey onwards  
Songs to thee we raise,  
Mighty One.

Thou didst aid our fathers,  
Guard us all our days,

Wonder-worker hearken  
Come in thy splendor,  
Come in thy mighty power.

Feed us and inspire us  
Keep us in your care,  
Mighty One.

Lead us past pursuers,  
Unto meadows fair.

Wonder-worker hearken  
Come in thy splendor,  
Come in thy mighty power.

Ching Wei Lin, *harp*  
Reka Csernyik and Svetlana Seaman, *sopranos*  
Jody Bell and Ruby Rousell, *mezzosopranos*  
Chris Bradley, *conductor*

The years 1900 through 1912 could be thought of as Holst's "Sanskrit" period. Inspired by his Theosophist stepmother, Holst developed an interest in the religious literature and poetry of India in his mid-twenties. While studying at the Royal College of Music in London with Sir Charles Villiers Stanford, sometimes a frustrating experience for the young composer, Gustav Holst took refuge in learning Sanskrit.

Whilst he was never particularly fluent, Holst was able to read from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and to translate hymns from the Rig Veda. His settings of translations of Sanskrit texts included *Sita* (1899–1906), a three-act opera based on an episode in the Ramayana (which he eventually entered for a competition for English opera set by the Milan music publisher Tito Ricordi); *Savitri* (1908), a chamber opera based on a tale from the Mahabharata; four groups of Hymns from the Rig Veda (1908–14); and two texts originally by Kālidāsa: *Two Eastern Pictures* (1909–10) and *The Cloud Messenger* (1913).<sup>1</sup>

From these ancient Vedic hymns, Gustav Holst selected 14 prayer-poems with the theme of mystery as their shared point of departure. Holst made his own translations, feeling that other translations into English seemed awkward and not sufficiently musical to fit his vision of the music.

Holst's first conception of The Choral Hymns from the Rig-Veda was as a set of solo songs for voice and piano, composed in 1907 and 1908. Since he had never heard Indian music, Holst struggled to find the appropriate musical sounds for the words. His entry in Grove observes, "He struggled to find appropriate sounds for the mood of the words." His 14 movements would soon resonate with singers and audiences around the world.

Of the four sets of Hymns, the most beautiful and most popular is the Third Group, set for female voices and harp. All are quite modal in construction, filled with mystery and awe of the universe and its creation. The text painting in the four groups dominates the harmonies, unisons, and dynamics, and their colours and contours seem to spill into the scores.

**Ritwik Sanyal** (India) is one of the virtuosos of dhrupad, the most ancient genre of the North Indian classical vocal music still in existence, and

Ritwik was born in Katihar and trained in the dhrupad style of the Dagar tradition, descendants of Haridas Dagar, the 15th century guru who trained the legendary Tansen. Between 1963 and 1975, Ritwik received his training in dhrupad under Ustad Mohiuddin Dagar and Ustad Zia Fariddudin Dagar in Mumbai.

Ritwik received an Master of Arts degree in Philosophy from Mumbai University and a Master in Music degree from Banaras Hindu University, securing the gold medal. He completed his Ph.D. in Musicology from the same University in 1980 under the supervision of the legendary Professor Prem Lata Sharma. Ritwik Sanyal now serves as Professor of Vocal Music at Banaras Hindu University where he also served as Head of the Department of Vocal Music and Dean of the Faculty of Performing Arts.

An outstanding dhrupad singer, guru, writer, professor and academic, and composer of dhrupad lyrics, during the past 33 years Ritwik Sanyal has contributed a great deal to the propagation of dhrupad in almost every part of India and the world.

**Leah Barclay** (Australia) is a composer, sound artist and curator working at the intersection of art, science, technology and the environment. Her work has been commissioned, performed and exhibited to wide acclaim across Australia, New Zealand, Canada, USA, Europe, India, China and Korea. Barclay creates complex sonic environments with a strong focus on the textural and timbral properties of sound. These works are realised through immersive performances and multi-sensory installations drawing on environmental field recordings, multi-channel sound diffusion, live performers and ephemeral projections.

Barclay's adventurous nature has led her to complete projects on the floor of the Australian ocean, desolate lava caves in New Zealand, the Amazon Jungle and the evocative backwaters of South India. Despite working predominately in an electroacoustic domain, her work spans chamber and symphonic compositions, scoring for film, theatre and dance to interactive media, data sonification and site-specific installations. She has been invited to participate in a diversity of international residencies including Centre d'arts Orford, Académie de Musique (Canada, 2007), IRCAM Academy (2008), Art Center Nabi (Korea, 2009), Vijnana Kala Vedi (India, 2009-2010), Sound+Pansori (GyeongGi Art Center, Korea, 2010), SCANZ: Eco Sapiens (New Zealand, 2011) and Mamori Sound Project (Brazil, 2011).

As a performer her studies were initially focused on western classical music and now revolve predominately around live electronics and the rhythmic traditions of South India and Korea. Barclay has studied percussion extensively in both countries resulting in a range of collaborations including the release of two CDs with the Nada Laya ensemble in South India and collaborations with acclaimed Korean percussionist Choi Yoonsang that have been supported by the Seoul Foundation for Arts and Culture. Her academic work has been published and presented at many of the world's forums for electroacoustic music and digital media including the International EMS Network (UK, 2007, Shanghai, 2010 and New York, 2011), The World Forum For Acoustic Ecology (Mexico, 2009) and the Society for Music Perception and Cognition (Montreal, 2007).

Barclay's dynamic work has resulted in numerous awards, including the Premier of Queensland's inaugural National New Media Scholarship (2009), the Asialink Performing Artist Residency for South Korea (2009) and the HELM Award for Environmental Art (2010). She has received major grants from state and federal funding bodies to produce ambitious community projects and has directed and curated intercultural projects across Australia, India and Korea. In addition to her creative practice, she serves in an advisory capacity for a range of arts and environmental organisations, including Ear to the Earth (New York) and Noosa Biosphere (UNESCO). Barclay holds a First Class Honours degree in Composition from the Queensland Conservatorium and has studied with Stephen Leek, John Coulter, Gerardo Dirié, Kim Cunio and Alcides Lanza. Her practice based PhD has involved site-specific projects across the globe exploring the value of creative methodologies in ecological crisis and the agency of environmental electroacoustic music.

# DIASPORA TWILIGHT SERIES

A glimpse into Indian music and its presence across the globe

Bringing to light aspects of Indian culture barely acknowledged in the Lonely Planet guides of recent generations, the Diaspora series hints at the manifold ways in which Indian culture has permeated into the West in the past 150 years or so.

## **6pm, Tuesday 14 May - THE RIG VEDA**

The first Diaspora concert begins with ancient Vedic chants, sung in Sanskrit by leading scholar-singer Ritwik Sanyal. That leads into Sanskrit settings of the Mass by Australian composer Greg Schiemer, a devotee of Indian culture for over 40 years. A short multimedia piece by Leah Barclay blends into a selection of Gustav Holst's glorious Rig Veda hymns for female voices and harp.

## **6pm, Wednesday 15 May - THE DAM(N) PROJECT**

Brisbane-based composer Leah Barclay is the central figure in the ensuing Diaspora concert - The DAM(N) Project connecting Australian and Indian communities around the common issue of global water security. In a deeply moving integration of recorded sounds, live music and dance, as well as projected images, Leah and her co-collaborators probe one of the most critical issues facing the future of the planet.

## **6pm, Thursday 16 May - FLAMENCO-INDO JAZZ**

The third Diaspora concert explores the little known origins of Flamenco, which developed from gypsy music with roots in India, and mixes it with jazz - another vibrant child of musical diaspora. Improvisation is a critical dimension in both jazz and Indian music. A quartet of musicians, led by pianist-composer Steve Newcomb and tabla virtuoso Dheeraj Shrestha, explore the common-ground between flamenco, jazz and Indian music, providing some illuminating illustrations of a fusion form that is little known or recognised.

## **6pm, Friday 17 May**

The final Diaspora concert celebrates the centenary of the opening of the Royal Opera House in Mumbai. What was once one of the most glowing and ostentatious symbols of the British Raj in India is more recently a déclassé cinema and venue for fashion shows. While the Maharashtra government finally restores the building, our program restores the content of this imposing grand dame to her former glory with excerpts from 19th century French opera. These reveal the Francophile fascination for all things orientales et exotiques. Join Maharajahs and Maharanis as you are invited with the upper crust of Bombay society to share the soaring melodies of Bizet, Delibes and Massenet.

**ENCOUNTERS: INDIA**

13 - 19 May, South Bank Brisbane  
[encountersfestival.com.au](http://encountersfestival.com.au)

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