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Episode 5: Strategising Institutional Music

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SUMMARY

The scope of many contemporary composers in the Australian landscape cannot be without musical visionary, Carl Vine AO. This week’s episode is in conversation with the composer and 19-year Artistic Director of world-renowned Australian chamber music organisation, Musica Viva. Talking through the significance of introducing youth to access, new repertoire and chamber music through education (primary school to university musical training), to descent in commissioning practices and performances of new or more recently composed works, and his thoughts about the restrictive economic model and its impact on music practitioners and audience experiences. We continue to wonder; will we ever get to a day where we can hear new works in the concert hall without needing them to be paired with the expected companion of (as beautiful and enjoyable as they are) Ravel’s Bolero or Holst’s The Planets?

TRANSCRIPT

Victoria Pham (VP): And we're back and this time, it's someone that I've honestly been rather nervous to have a chat with because it is someone who was once my composition teacher at the Sydney Conservatorium, prolific and Officer of the Order of Australia, Carl Vine AO. For those who are not already acquainted with his serious background, portfolio and to put it lightly resume, Carl has been one of Australia's most prolific composers, listed by Limelight in 2015 as one of Australia's top 10 greatest composers, who aside from crafting his music has been the long-standing, 20-year-long in fact, Artistic Director of Australian chamber music organisation Musica Viva. He currently continues to compose and lectures and teaches at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music. So, thank you for coming on board for the podcast!

Carl Vine (CV): Pleasure to be here!

VP: I really had no idea where to start in terms of what to ask you, but I suppose a possible way in would be your evolution as a composer. Before I met you, I was looking at all of your music and it was perhaps more electronic, with more collaborations with dance and other mediums and by the time I came to study with you, it was a lot of concert hall. How would you describe your evolution as a composer?

CV: Well it's interesting because I started out as a modernist. That was my ethos and my aesthetic that every work had to be a completely novel event that had never happened before, and this view of the audience as rather stupid sheep that needed to be educated. To me, that is an extreme view of the modernist argument, but that was what I grew up with as a teenager, and I'd actually bought into the Stockhausen line that the "new music" for the "new world" had to be electronic. And I was very good at electronics and I built synthesizers and so on, and at the same time I was a concert pianist and I was training to be a concert pianist and so I had this dual identity and I would compose electronic music and then play Bach and Beethoven, and then Bartok and more modern people. So, basically, I never had a game plan. I never had a... all I wanted to be was a composer-pianist, whatever that meant. And that has changed over the years. So, after the first 10 years of being a professional composer, it dawned on me that the modernist argument really wasn't cutting it for me. It did not represent me in any meaningful way and then I had to find a way to look back at the things I adored which was, impressive harmonic progressions, and singable lyrical melodies, and actually incorporate these into a view of the music I needed to do, and that then has changed continually for the last ... what is it now?... 35 years.

VP: Would you say that you've considered the audience more as a result?

CV: Yeah, absolutely. And the problem as modernism as ethos is that it is isolating and arrogant, and it is built on the idea that you have this majestic, magical idea of things that common people cannot understand, and therefore, what's the point? You know, if you are not working with people, if you are not contributing to the people around you, you are wasting your time. We don't have very long on this earth so let's make the most of each other and

contribute to, particularly in this time where the world is going a little bit crazy yet again, we need to contribute to a sense of unity and of contribution to a common good.

VP: Do you think that's the role and responsibility of someone creating or making art?

CV: I think that's everybody's role. I think no matter what you're doing, if you are a lawyer or working at a convenience store, whatever it is you're doing, you are part of something much larger than yourself, and we all have to contribute. What I love about the pandemic that we're in the middle of right now is that the most important people are the people working at supermarkets, and cleaners, and security staff, and the kinds of jobs that we tend to denigrate or regard as less valuable. I always had the highest respect for garbage collectors because without them, we'd all be... completely, literally lost in garbage. And it's not a highly respected profession but it's absolutely critical.

VP: Well, they're our absolutely necessary keyworkers. You mention the word lawyer before and I was watching some older interviews of you and you spoke about if you had your time over, you would have might consider a law degree. Why law?

CV: It seems to me that studying for law seems to me the most acute way to hone your mental skills. Certainly, the lawyers I know, I tend to know rather good lawyers, because of my work in concert presenting, and they tend to have the sharpest minds and to me the most interesting intellect. It's not, I suspect, that they were smart to begin with, they've just learnt how to work well with their brain.

VP: And that would be conducive to working compositionally, you think:?

CV: Well, I've always since the age of 5, I've always done something musical. But in terms of what I was saying before about contributing to society, I could actually, well I was a web designer for five years quite happily, and pretty much gave up composing for a while and I was actually quite happy doing that. And so I got back into music because I finally felt a lack after about 4 or 5 years and so I thought, I can go back now. But I would actually be happy with a number of jobs that are non-musical, indeed, non artistic.

VP: If you talk about a lack, do you still mean that it felt like you felt a lack of creative output?

CV: Um, no. I just thought I've got more to say. So it wasn't that I was bursting with need to put something out there. I actually have some ideas and I'd like to do that now. Because I'd already had quite a career up until that point. I had the option of coming back into it.

VP: That's interesting. Because a lot of people who, well, I don't know how old you were when you left the career and decide to become a web designer, some people would find it extremely difficult to enter back into the realm, particularly writing for concert music.

CV: It is very difficult. I was 43 when I gave composing a miss and really only came back properly when I was 48.

VP: Ah ok, In terms of reentering the scene, was there an awareness or perception that your position of where you sit as a composer in the hierarchy. For example, writing for orchestra there is a perception, maybe by the public, that the composer is at the top of the hierarchy, but in reality are we somewhere in the middle or some people I've spoken to in previous episodes

speaking about being at the bottom of the hierarchy, hence there feeling like there's a lot of difficulty working with larger ensembles like orchestras?

CV: Ah, that has changed in the last few years anyways. I was probably at the peak of my career in my 40s, and at that time orchestras, dance companies, theatre companies, everybody commissioned new music so there's a lot less of that now. And indeed, orchestras in Australia comparatively rarely commission new music, compared to what was happening in the 90s. I think there was a lot more music happening, and concert presenters of all sorts I think are now... it's much harder for them to make a case for new music, which is ridiculous and that's a question I hope we'll come back to. But that has changed generally. As for the level and hierarchy, I don't know. My impression is that if orchestras are higher up in the hierarchy, most of them don't know what to do with new music.

VP: Why do you think that is? The way they run or how their financial model is structured?

CV: Well, it's a financial model but it's kind of the triumph of the publicity departments and that, you know, better orchestras are a step apart. But a lot of orchestras are guided by marketing principles rather than aesthetic ones, and that is a problem. And I think you can tell that the greater orchestras give far more attention to the artistic design of the season, of the orchestra's repertoire, and the ones that are struggling a bit finish up with very little option to actually do what the marketing people do.

VP: But that only makes sense if you want to hold onto a certain kind of listenership.

CV: Yeah, I think they're wrong, in fact, and that any concert presenter needs to take an audience on a journey with them. And most of the orchestras around the world are regional and you can talk about the Chicago Symphony or London Symphony, but they are regional orchestras, and they have to service their town, and the region around that town. And it's just as true of a small, regional orchestra in Australia. And they need to take that audience, that community *with* them, and do that by engaging and not by simply playing to people's uninformed expectations.

VP: Why do you think this culture has evolved? I really only know Australia, well in terms of closely in relation to orchestral programming, that we just play the classical hits of the same repertoire, Bach, Beethoven and there's so much Mozart programmed every year, I think more than any other composer in Australia, why there seems to be a lack of engagement with local and living practitioners?

CV: It's because they are being led in most cases by the marketing department, and it's a fear of alienating the audience but what it fails to do is engage the audience. And if you simply send out a questionnaire saying 'What music do you like?' then you will get "Oh I love Beethoven, I love Mozart." That's the wrong question, right? What you need to do is give a series of options that people do not know, that they have not encountered before whether they are living or dead composers and then you can say "Here's something exciting! Try this out!" But you have to then take the audience with you. If you simply have an entire year's program that's all adventurous, difficult music then they won't come with you, and that's what the marketers fear, that the moment you bring in new music, you lose the audience. It's the wrong way around, you need to take the audience with you.

VP: Do you think that's partly due to the perception of new music being so abstract and so experimental, that it's terrifying for a guaranteed audience say 3000 seats in the Sydney Opera House?

CV: Well, there is certainly an element of that and there are types of contemporary music going back... We are paying the price now of the avant-garde of the 1970s and the 1980s, which was the modernist ethos and it was aggressive. It was dismissive and arrogant and frankly, hard to listen to, and we're still paying the price for that so you need to move cleverly and carefully, and that's what I tried to do when I was at Musica Viva as designing concert programs that engaged people.

VP: And with Musica Viva did you find that, because there are two branches – the really enormous education branch, as well as the touring and the concerts – do you think the balance between the two of those in terms of exposing people of different ages to different repertoire helped?

CV: Well, they are completely different enterprises within Musica Viva and for those who don't know, Musica Viva is the world's largest entrepreneur of chamber music and it presents something like 3000 concerts a year that, and the education program presents to about 280 000 students per year, and it's a mix of genre from the idea of small, live music performances and then the concert program is about 100 concerts a year in major capital cities. So, I was in charge of the capital city stuff, just the concert program, and that had a national audience of about 20 000 so throughout Australia, and the audience that goes to those concerts are mature adults, frequently in their 60s and above. The clients for the education program are actually not the students, it's the teachers who are the clients because the students don't book an ensemble to go and visit the school, the teacher does. And so, it's actually a massively different model in terms of what it has to do. So, the concert program is talking directly to its clients. The education program is talking directly to the teachers, the supervisors of the client, and has to fulfil educational purposes. The concert program doesn't have to be education. It does have to incorporate the sense of shared community and shared discovery so the program I worked on would commission at least 4 or 5 works every year to be part of the 100-concert annual season, and those work would get 8 to 10 performances and 2 or 3 national broadcasts.

VP: That's what I find amazing that you have repeat performances of pieces, because there is always a tendency for sometimes larger pieces being played only once at their premiere.

CV: And that was the great thing about Musica Viva. It did have this capacity with a national audience. One group will come and it was frequently a high quality international performing ensemble, and they will do a full tour of Australia, and this doesn't happen anywhere in the world, and if that group has done a group of America, they work with 6 or 10 different presenters. But if they come to Australia, it's Musica Viva that does all 10 concerts so they carry the same program with the commissioned work balanced very carefully and thoughtfully with their repertoire whatever that may be.

VP: Do you think that's the way of spreading Australian work around the world? Getting these international groups to play this music as part of their rep?

CV: Absolutely. It's happened and it works. And particularly, we would always consult with the international group saying "here's a number of composers, do you like one? Can we commission one of these?" And they would choose it and then have a sense of ownership with

that work and come and play it in Australia, and many of them keep it in their repertoire when they can.

VP: Amazing! I didn't realise they had a say. For some reason I always thought that Musica Viva drove the commissioning arm.

CV: Well, yes we did and it was always a set of composers that I would choose, but we had to engage the artists. There's no point forcing an artist to play a work they don't want to do. But the negotiating could take 3 years, working it out. And some of them would come and say "I know this Australian composer, I want to play something by them," and that was terrific as well. But once again, the choice of composer and the genre and the style, that fitted within the general idea of a chamber music concert and that rules out a lot of composers, particularly the more experimental ones and that's just a question of that's what Musica Viva does.

VP: That makes sense. And coming from that commissioning arm, I had another question about the other programs Musica Viva ran, particularly started by you when you were still the Director. 2017? I think you started the women's program, the Hildegard Project.

CV: The Hildegard Project, I think it was a little before then. I had commissioned women before then but this was a particular focus on composing women. And this was simply, well we've talked about this before, but it was redress of the imbalance, and of course there is a massive imbalance particularly in classical music that female composers before the 20th century are rare, incredibly rare, you know 3 or 4 of them actually had any coverage at all. But it's a mistake to say that this is the fault of classical music, it's not, it's the fault of the world and the fault of society. You know, *everything* women do, they are devalued and it still continues. And so, it is therefore, an absolutely required redress of the balance. I still wanted to make sure that, and this was special funding through Musica Viva just for women – *the* women composers that we commissioned – and it was just to say, like any affirmative action it has the danger of then being unrepresentative but it's still worth that chance. I don't think that in the result of what we commissioned with Musica Viva, I don't think there was any sacrifice of quality. I think we had some fantastic work and it ultimately didn't matter if it was a man or a woman composing the music because you can't tell. You can't listen to the music and go "Oh that's a woman," that doesn't work. But it was great music and it was really continuing the commissioning program that I'd been running, well I ran it for 19 years in different ways, and making sure that at least we got an equal number of women involved.

VP: But you did in 2018 and 2019.

CV: And in 2020, in fact I think we had more women than men in 2020, but of course none of those concerts went to air.

VP: So, will they be delayed for next year's season?

CV: I don't know as I am no longer with the company...

VP: Oh yes, that's right...

CV:... So I have no idea if they're going to hand over or not.

VP: Ok, well I hope so.

CV: Well, I hope so.

VP: Well having read a lot of womens' programs rather recently, one of the questions that comes up a lot is whether or not these programs or statements made by artistic companies or really any company the world because there has been a huge shift in the last 5 years, whether this discourages people, like men, from applying to certain things or excluding them from these spaces?

CV: I think there's a problem now is that it's probably a really bad time to be a young male composer, in that every opportunity that arises now and this is fantastic, now every opportunity says for women composers or for young women. That's absolutely wonderful but it's a lousy time to be a man. And this is part of the affirmative action, you know, men have had it – the lion's share of the advantage for so long, it's time that they lost out for a bit. But I'm really happy that I'm not starting out right now. So, I think it would be very hard, but my view is look it's artificial but it's overdue. And what I would not do is damn any organisation using this affirmative action to encourage women composers, I would damn them for any reason, I think it's absolutely reasonable and intelligent thing to do, it's just not so good for young men composers.

VP: It could be misconstrued as being in some ways discouraging *but we need* this artificial step in order to normalise seeing different people in different spaces.

CV: Absolutely, and I think in Australia the equalisation has been moving quite fast and I think there's been a fairly universal acceptance of affirmative action in music, I think that we're seeing much more even numbers very quickly, like in the last decade the proportion has changed. I think it used to be Australian Music Centre representing about 4 or 5000 composers that there was 25% women represented and even that has grown to at least 33% percent. It's grown already. And the thing we know is that the women composers are better than the men but, we just have to let them find their own level but they now have the chance of not being discriminated against.

INTERMISSION I:

VP: For our first musical Intermission is sneakily one of my favourites, and it's an excerpt from Carl's Symphony no. 5 "Percussion Symphony" (1995) recorded and performed here by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra and Synergy Percussion. This section is taken from the *Tarentella* section from the work's single movement.

Follows a 5-minute excerpt from Vine Symphony no. 5 "Percussion Symphony" (1995)

VP: Now moving onto another section of your career, teaching, do you think having taught at the Sydney Conservatorium, it has helped you find and engage with younger and emerging composers and to work closely with them?

CV: Well, that was why I started at the Con. I did not really need a third job but I did really need to find good young composers. And it was interesting that, I thought the most interesting

composers that I was working with then turned out to be the women that was just luck of the draw, I think. But I went in looking for young composers and surprise, surprise there they were.

VP: [Laughs] All collectively!

CV: I think they're the largest composition cohort in Australia. The cohort is 110 students, and most composition departments have only a dozen students.

VP: That's true. Just going overseas, sometimes there are only 4 students.

CV: Yup!

VP: Have you found that teaching has helped you as well as a composer, helped you think about commissioning when you were in your last couple of years at Musica Viva?

CV: Well, it was very handy as a commissioner, and I kind of developed a career path for young composers in that there was a range of activities that I was in charge of and so they would start with a morning concert and do a morning concert. And we had chamber music festivals, and then they would be commissioned for a chamber music festival, and if both of those worked out, they would then get a big commission for a major national tour with international performers. So that was a kind of graduation level, and there was just enough time to get a couple of composers through to that higher level.

VP: I remember running into Elizabeth Younan right before she moved to study in America, and she went through that Musica Viva pathway which is really cool because I see a lot of her music being played around the world now.

CV: Yup, and she's the first or second who made it through. I really started that after from working at the Con which was 6 years ago so I didn't have quite enough time to move that forward.

VP: And you're still teaching there? Undergrads there...?

CV: Yeah, I am. Under and over graduates.

VP: I actually have a little anecdote. When I was 8 years, it was brass quintet or a weird mixed ensemble, it wasn't a wind quintet. But there were two French horns and I became totally obsessed with the French horn for years having never seen one before.

CV: And French horn is a wonderful instrument. And we hear these stories every now and again about Musica Viva – The school's program – because it is massive and it is wonderful. The horrible thing is the absence of government support for music training in schools and you were lucky that you went to a school that was smart enough to make sure they had specialist music tuition, but most of them don't particularly in disadvantaged areas and state schools have very little opportunity for music training, and it's not just about music and the use of the brain and the hand-eye coordination, muscle memory and all sorts of things that music assists and kids who study music are better at everything, especially sciences. It's more, particularly if they are practicing music and playing an instrument. The brain works in a different way when you are playing because you have the left-right brain talking to each other far more than in any other human activity. And the corpus callosum in musicians is thicker than in normal people because the two halves of the brain need to communicate so much. It is measurably thicker.

VP: And a good thing to encourage is that music when you're younger in terms of the level of access you need in order to master it or just to have lessons for two years, it very high. Just having lessons for two years, or having an instrument with you. If you can't hire one you have to buy one and they tend to be a couple of hundred dollars to a few thousand dollars.

CV: And you know, that's why there are a number of programs that have been set up, and it really doesn't cost very much for a school to have those instruments and they often have them donated from outside the school, but they need a trained music teacher not just the PE teacher who has nothing better to do on a Thursday.

VP: Exactly. And continuing from Musica Viva coming to my school, they brought with them a piece of Australian music and there was pianist with them, and it was Miriam Hyde work. And I was very lucky in that the two piano teachers I had before I eventually came to the Con both students of Miriam Hyde so her repertoire were in my grasp at all times to the point where some original scores were kept by my second teacher, Dorothy Elvidge. The thing is, if that program isn't introduced to a younger set of people, inclusive of tertiary education, that could be potentially why there is a gap in wanting to experience new music or working with composers, because we don't get introduced to contemporary repertoire in our learning and playing.

CV: Of course, of course. There is no easy solution to that. I think if there was a lot more teaching going on than there would be a broader repertoire.

VP: Do you think at a tertiary level there should be a lot more engagement between say, the composition department and the performance students?

CV: Well, in a good [laughs] in a good institution that should absolutely happen. I'm trying to think, I don't think it especially happens at Juilliard, for instance. And the pattern certain in Australia there's almost no even co-operation between composers and performers, which is – as you mention Elizabeth Younan – that's why I encouraged Liz to go to Curtis Institute. It was part of the program that every performer plays a work by one of the composers, and every ensemble at the institute plays a work by one of the composers, and they have a commissioning program, and it is all joined together, and it's the way things should be and almost never are.

VP: And you encouraged me to seek out a teacher when I went to Paris, and when I ended up at the Conservatoire de Paris that's how they run things as well. So, you work really closely... and all your classes are public. And if you're a new composer and the performers are interested in checking you out, they turn up to your composition lesson.

CV: So who was your main teacher?

VP: I ended up with Thierry Escaich.

CV: And he was one of the two I recommended you chase down.

VP: Yes, and he wrote back immediately. Not only did he take me around the Conservatorium so I ended up having private tuition for the 6 months I was there, but also to all these amazing churches as he is primarily an organist and improviser.

CV: Yeah, yeah, and in fact, we had an ensemble that used to be based in Paris and they wanted to do a tour with Thierry. A tour of Australia but of course the problem is that we don't have the organs to do the tour. You know, we have seven national venues, only 3 of them with usable organs.

VP: Really, you mean big concert halls?

CV: Concert halls yes.

VP: yeah, it would be difficult in a Cathedral.

CV: Yeah, the sight lines would be awful, the sound is bad particularly for piano trio with an organ and they don't seat enough people. They need to seat 1000 per concert.

VP: Do you think in these institutions like Curtis and for example what I experienced in Paris and Paris in general being quite open to new things, that their programming for new music is totally different because there is a greater sense of collaboration within the community that is classical music?

CV: Well I don't know what the deal is at the Conservatoire, but I do know that at Curtis that there is the assumption that there will be modern music and all of the performers understand that and it isn't an issue because it shouldn't be. But on their composition staff, one of their resident teachers in Jennifer Higdon who's one of the leading lights of new music in America so you would be student to not take that place as a pianist or a violinist with Jennifer Higdon.

VP: So, why do you think there's been a change since the time you were starting out to your peak in your 30s and 40s all the way to now in terms of commissioning new music everywhere from chamber music to orchestral music?

CV: It depends on what sort of change you think has happened. I think less of it is being commissioned now and I think it's something to do with the triumph of economic rationalism over actual rationalism. And so I think economic rationalism is irrational. You simply can't measure everything in terms of its economic return. We don't work like that and particularly looking at anything to do with art, or personal appreciation or meditation or anything to do with our internal qualities, the economic impact is kind of irrelevant. So that is what I suspect and that is what I fear, that economic rationalism has kind of thwarted the way that people go about their business especially when it comes to music or musical matters.

VP: Do you think there's a fear because it costs so much in one hit to commission a symphony and then they think the return is we're going to play it once at the premiere and then maybe it'll discourage the audience to buy tickets in the first place, so we'll pair it up with something they'll recognise. So we'll play the new piece in the first half and then play something they'll recognise, oh I don't know, maybe Stravinsky in the second half just so we can ensure an audience?

CV: I can tell you in the last five years I've had two commissions. One was paired with Bolero which apparently, they save that up for once a decade for when they have a completely unsellable program they put Bolero in the other half, and that was to sell my Concerto for Two Pianos. And the other one was a Holst the Planets, and that again is a once in a decade performance they save up for something unsellable which was my 8th Symphony. Different orchestras, different reasoning, but yes that absolutely goes on.

VP: Do you find that annoying as a practice that bigger institutions do with the companion pieces?

CV: As a programmer of music, I understand exactly where they're coming from and they're wrong. You have to, as I said before, you have to take the audience with you. What I'm very proud of with Musica Viva over the 19 years I was there is that the audience expected new music. And that was always what they were talking about in interval was the new piece in the program, which was usually before interval, but you don't have Bolero or blockbuster works in chamber music so... Beethoven Opus 131 in the second half. But, there was an excitement about hearing new music. Now, only one of the orchestras I've worked with has that sense and that's the Western Australian Symphony. They've actually certainly tried to create that sense of expectation in the audience and their commissioning program is still exemplary in Australia. Most of the others are simply afraid of losing ticket sales, so they either don't commission or they kept trotting out Beethoven 5, Bolero and Holst's The Planets, time and time again just because they have some obligation to still commission new music, and they're trying to find a way to white-wash the new music. It's the wrong approach. What you need to do is to create a sense of expectation and thrill, over something you've never heard before.

VP: And I would say that before they would say the largest chunk of public funding, they do have a responsibility to engage with living people, living composers and performers – we don't really talk about new experimental performers working closely with big organisations like orchestras – but they do have a responsibility partly because of the financing they receive.

CV: Well, that is normally why they finishing playing any new music at all, not because there is any artistic vision or belief that there is any value of this to their audience or the world in general but it's "Oh we've got to do one of these or they'll cut our funding." Once again, it's this inverse economic rationalism.

VP: Do you think they an obligation also to the level of philanthropy they require to run as an orchestra that perhaps a certain audience wants to hear, say the Beethoven and the Mozart?

CV: Well absolutely, but then a lot of the commissioners are well-heeled people who have taste and interest and they are the ones, in fact, who force them to play new music. And companies... I was going to say like Musica Viva but there's are no companies like Musica Viva... it has a large number and very diverse range of sponsors, and they are the ones who always want the new music, and so they are in fact frequently lawyers or occasionally businessmen who have managed to keep their tastes intact through very successful experiences, and they are very eager for new music and new experiences. And it's not the general populace, make them part of the argument.

VP: Mm, and you talk about making it an experience and it's true that sometimes when I go to orchestral performances, not just in Australia, I'm confronted with the same repertoire everywhere I go.

CV: Well, it's interesting the Chicago symphony for instance has a complete commissioning program that runs through the year. And sure they also have a subset of different concert series with no new music, but they do have a series that contains a high proportion of commissioned music or new music, it is doable. You just need to do it long enough and encourage this sense of experiment and enjoyment.

VP: Do you think the way some orchestras are run because of it being a very hierarchical structure and they have very limited rehearsal time in order to put some concerts together, that it affects wanting to try something new or play something they haven't heard of before?

CV: Absolutely. The economics are difficult for orchestras. As you say, they cost a lot and frequently a commissioned work, you'll be lucky if you have 6 hours rehearsal before the world premiere. So, you might have 2 hours one day, 2 hours another day and then a one hour run through on the day of the concert and that's it. So, it just costs too much to bring all the musicians together and the conductor and the soloists, and it's possibly true, the audience for that concert is not going to be as high as a concert that is just Tchaikovsky and Beethoven. And so, there are economic realities and we have to face those, but I believe there are way to deal with that, and that you do have a separate series for those who have no sense of adventure or indeed, a sense of excitement in music and they're doing it just because they've done it for half their life. And there are other people.

VP: Mmm, and SSO used to run that separate series a few years ago. They did the Carriageworks series and it was so cool and then it just stopped.

CV: Well, the Carriagework series always lost a lot of money.

VP: Ah, that explains it.

CV: and that has always been like that. I've worked with Sydney Symphony for 30 years on and off, and there was always a modern music series and it always lost a lot of money. And it ran for a while, it used to run at Vebrugghen Hall at Sydney Conservatorium which is a much cheaper venue, smaller, it was about the right size and it still lost money. And before then it was at the Sydney Town Hall. But that's just the way of things, but the last conductor of Sydney Symphony who I think had a really cohesive view of taking the audience on that journey was Stuart Challender who died in 1993, and he was born in Sydney, studied in Germany and came back and really had a vision of a Sydney Orchestra and the Sydney society, all of the suburbs moving forward, and he had a long-term plan in encouraging Sydney composers particularly and making it part of the orchestra's history and it's future. And no one since then has had anything like that view.

INTERMISSION II:

VP: For our second musical Intermission is an excerpt from one of Carl's latest premieres, the 2019 premiere of his Piano Sonata no. 4 at Carnegie Hall by pianist Lindsay Garritson.

Follows a 3-minute excerpt from Piano Sonata No. 4 (2019), Carl Vine, Live Performance at
Carnegie Hall

VP: Now, I've got a bit of a weird question. This is more, I suppose a composer's question, say you're working with just one of the orchestras in Australia, maybe one of the ones on the Eastern coast. If you wrote something as technically difficult as the Rite of Spring, now an orchestral standard, would it be comfortable for the orchestra, would it be playable given the amount of time they actually have with the new music?

CV: No. [laughs] That's a very simple answer. And that actually happened to me on my 2nd Symphony which was a co-commission between the Melbourne and Sydney Symphony Orchestras, this was back in golly... 1988. And the conductor had only allowed one rehearsal, so it was basically 2 hours to rehearse a 20-minute piece that was incredibly difficult, and about half way through the rehearsal he realised we weren't going to get there and threw his hands up and said "Oh well, let's see what happens on the night." And we did, we saw what happened on the night, and it was 20 minutes of complete mayhem and it didn't resemble the score at all. And that was when I realised I couldn't write really hard music for Australian Orchestras.

VP: Do you think just at that time it was just Australian orchestras you were experiencing that with?

CV: No, and frequently now if I'm asked to write a piece for an orchestra, I will say in the negotiation, how much rehearsal will there be? And usually, I don't think it's ever in the contract, but usually, they're pretty honest and they'll say well, there we can only do 2 calls and that's good, that's 4 hours. So, I know how hard you can write orchestral work to prepare in 4 hours, and occasionally they've said 4 hours and they've actually got six and that was exciting. That means I'm almost as good as... oh, I don't know trying to think of a lesser... Scriabin, let's say. I got that much rehearsal time. But basically, the conductor understood the score and thought it was worth working on, but it doesn't happen all the time.

VP: Does that, well I suppose it does, but does that affect how you write in terms of limiting what you can write or are willing to explore orchestrally?

CV: Yeah, absolutely. Then as a composer, you have to make the choice. Am I going to write something without considering the performers at all so that maybe sometime 200 years after I'm dead it will be rediscovered and played properly, *or* will I something that is playable on 2 hours preparation and particularly with concertos, I think I've managed to do this quite well in my last few concertos. The orchestral part can be loud, and can be effective but really easy to play. And the soloist, unlike the orchestra who has played the piece for two hours before the world premiere, will have played it for 3 months. So as long as the soloist does all of the hard stuff, all of the virtuosic, flick their hair in the air and do all the soloist things, and the orchestra can chug along making a lot of noise and lots of interesting sounds but it's easy to play, and easy to rehearse, so I have actually got quite actually good at doing that.

VP: And this will be different writing for chamber music? You've got more time to rehearse and work?

CV: Absolutely! And a good chamber group, if they're playing a work they've chosen to do, they will give it 500 hours of preparation, not 2 hours. The average string quartet, if you go to see a string quartet concert, they didn't just get together yesterday like the orchestra did. Do if you go to the orchestral concert you should think, well two days ago they didn't know any of this music, now they do. If you go and hear a string quartet, frequently they've known it for 10 years, and if it's a new work, they might have commissioned it 3 years ago, they might have played it 300 times.

VP: I could probably keep... Given this absolute wealth of experience, what do you have going on now or coming up?

CV: A couple years ago I was on the jury of the Sydney International Piano Competition, and one of the players I was particularly impressed with was an American girl names Lindsay Garritson. She didn't make I think to the third round, but she played my piece *Tocattisimmo*, in the second round, and I thought it was a terrible crime that she didn't make carry through so I spoke to her when I was able to, because she was no longer in the competition. We stayed in touch and she said she would like to commission me to write a piece and as it turned out, I did, and it took about 18 months to put it together and to thank her for having the idea of having the idea of commissioning my 4th piano sonata from me, she had the exclusive right to play it for 12 months. And the middle of the twelve months started happening through COVID-19 so she did the World Premiere in New York at Carnegie Hall, and then she played it a few times in London and Paris, and then she was going to continue around the world playing it but that never happened so hopefully she'll have enough time to do that in the following year.

VP: Have all your other performances that were supposed to be this year, have they been postponed to next year?

CV: I didn't actually have many this year. There was a new work I had finished earlier in the year that didn't have a performance date but it's supposed to be on next July, but I'm not sure due to COVID as I don't think we'll be out of the woods even then.

VP: I'm not sure if we will be either given the questions of travelling or getting audiences safely into closed venues, but I hope that we'll continue to hear more of your new music soon! I just wanted to say a huge thank you for coming on the podcast, and for talking with me and answering all my questions – some odd and new, and some a repetition of things we've spoken about before – but always with such interesting answers. Thank you, Carl!

CV: Thank you! I hope it comes out in the edit [laughs]

VP: And stay well in Sydney! For everyone out there, information about Carl, his work, his records – including Lindsay Garritson's recordings of his 4th sonata and all his piano works- about Musica Viva and any of his upcoming performances, many of which were delayed but no doubt will be unveiled in 2021, will be linked below. Cheers for listening to another episode and catch you all next time!

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RESOURCES

Carl Vine

<http://www.carlvine.com/cgi-bin/index.cgi/>

<https://www.fabermusic.com/we-represent/carl-vine>

Musica Viva

<https://musicaviva.com.au/>

The Hildegard Project

<https://musicaviva.com.au/about-us/hildegard-project/>

2018 Annual Report

<https://musicaviva.com.au/media-releases/2018-annual-report/>