



The Origin Cycle

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Date
Thu 19 Nov

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Price
\$12.00 to \$20.00

Opening Times
7pm

Event Website
www.ensembleoffspring.org.au

Event Phone
02 8256 222

At
[Australian Museum](#)

Address
6 College St
Sydney, 2010

Telephone
02 9320 6000

Libretto by Charles Darwin? The Italian musical term literally means "little book", but Darwin's *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*, published 150 years ago this month, remains the biggest book in the history of science; some would say the most influential non-religious text ever. For centuries concertgoers have taken for granted the setting of holy scripture to music, and now more believe in DNA than God, so why haven't composers previously plundered scientific literature to put in the mouths of soloists?

One obvious answer is that the prose most scientists write is painful to read, let alone sing, but Darwin's gentlemanly Victorian style is elegant and highly agreeable. So a secular oratorio using his biological Genesis is a great idea – and, like most scientific ideas, it seems obvious after it has been persuasively articulated.

The progenitors of *The Origin Cycle* are biologist Peter Godfrey-Smith and soprano Jane Sheldon. The pair assigned excerpts to six composers from Sydney and one from Melbourne, Elliot Gyger. His part is called *The Face of Nature*, which "may be compared to a yielding surface, with ten thousand sharp wedges packed close together and driven inwards by incessant blows, sometimes one wedge being struck, and then another with greater force," as Darwin wrote in 1859 for Chapter III. The same analogy can be found in his secret notebook from 1838, the year he read Malthus. "I found it a joy to set," Gyger says. "The imagery is so powerful and the language very poetic."

Sydney-born Nicholas Vines, now at Harvard University, was given the what he judges is probably the most "way out" of the *Origin* set. "My work attempts to invoke both the incredible energy and busy-ness of a beehive, and the striking fastidiousness of Darwin's observations," he says.

The seasick voyager of the HMS *Beagle* was no mere theorist: he would reproduce others' experiments on instinctive animal behavior and devise his own. Chapter VII opens with the admission that "so wonderful an instinct as that of the hive-bee making its cells will probably have occurred to many readers, as a difficulty sufficient to overthrow my whole theory." Surely honeycomb was incontestable evidence for the prevailing view that each species was created separately: how could such an intelligent design arise from simple creatures without an intelligent designer?

His answer here was that since wax is a scarce material, bees who use it more efficiently have a greater chance of survival. Vines's piece is titled *Economy of Wax*; it has a lattice structure analogous to the honeycomb's hexagons, using an harmonic rhythm in the ratio of 6:1; and just as Darwin's illustrated the principle of natural selection across dozens of plant and animal examples, Vines uses "a single melody over and over again in a whole variety of different ways."

The diverse group of composers is fortunate to have as conductor Roland Peelman, a scholar of wide-ranging styles, specialised in choral music. An ensemble including strings, percussion, clarinet, flute and harp will perform the hour-long cycle at Sydney's sandstone temple of Natural History, the Australian Museum, beneath the whale skeleton. The work premiered in Boston in April.

Darwin's book is his mild-mannered argument for what has become the unifying theory of life science, but even without any musical setting it is a song to the living, a secular hymn about the quick and the dead, a naturalist's awestruck meditation on our fellow creatures – omitting any divine agency, but still with a sense of wonder at what has been created. It is a delight to read, and Sydney, which Darwin visited in 1836, will soon have the pleasure of hearing it sung. *Jason Catlett*

Map

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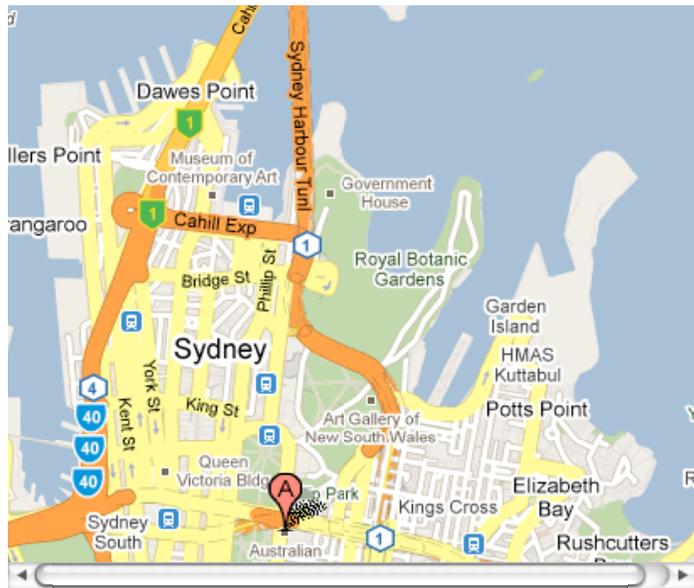




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