



Pictures at an exHERbition

Text and music by Sally Whitwell

SA part

Composer's Note - Pictures at an exHERbition

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If you really pushed me to make a call, Mussorsgky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* would be one of my favourite pieces in the classical repertoire. Somewhat outrageously, for a pianist, I prefer the colours and textures of the orchestrated version. I reasonably regularly listen to it, especially in transit. But to be honest, it's not the kind of music that I perform all that often i.e. music by dead, white, male composers. I mean, it's 2020 and as the meme says "I can't believe I still have to protest this sh*t."

And I feel it too for those in the visual art world. I mean, things are a good deal better over there in contemporary art world, where women are exhibited regularly and everyone seems to embrace it without a fuss. As for women artists from centuries gone by, it's less good news but they're working on it. I'm reminded of the situation daily as my older brother, who is excellent at choosing gifts thoughtfully, gave me some [Guerrilla Girls](#) merchandise which I use as an iPad cover. Entitled *Advantages of Being a Woman Artist*, it's a list of truths that's pretty relatable for any creative woman. My favourite bit — "Being reassured that whatever kind of art you make it will be labeled feminine." Ooft. Too real.

And so I conceived of this song cycle *Pictures at an exHERbition* as a kind of gift for those fighting the traditional, patriarchal structures of the entire creative sector. Three songs, inspired by three works by three wonderful Australian women artists of last century. All are depictions of scenes around Sydney Harbour.

In-curve is inspired by Grace Cossington Smith's *The Bridge in-curve*, a depiction of an unfinished Sydney Harbour Bridge, painted in 1930

The Code is inspired by Thea Proctor's woodcut print *Women with fans*. It is thought to be a portrait of two other artists, printmakers Ethel Spowers and Eveline Syme, sitting above Rushcutters Bay.

Where would we sail? is inspired by a very different view of the same location *Still life and Rushcutters Bay* by Margaret Olley.

Sally Whitwell
November 2020

Further information on the artworks

1. In-curve

The Bridge in-curve (1930) Grace Cossington Smith

<https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/3007/>

2. The Code

Women with fans (1930) Thea Proctor

<https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/207.1975/>

3. Where would we sail?

Still life and Rushcutter's Bay (1998) Margaret Olley

<http://etchinghouse.com.au/arrivals/still-life-and-rushcutters-bay/>

Text

By Sally Whitwell

1. In-curve

Steel and stone
Reaching up and over
Over the border between the tribes

Connecting us
Dividing us
Bisecting us
And siding us

Beneath electric skies
Both claim the shining border
Undulating there

Over the border between the tribes

2. The Code

She wasn't like the other girls
Tailored,
Crisp,
Eyes that challenged,
Monumental,
Slicked back,
Shiny.

"There's a secret language," she said
As she fanned herself,
"Do you know it?"

Flick and a flourish of the fan,
Eyes darting side to side,
Sizing up our opponents
"Someone's watching us!"

And I didn't even care.

3. Where would we sail?

Pieces of our hearts on the window sill
Verdant green's subtle flowering
Rounded forms,
Golden,
Shining,
A gilded cage wrought from iron
Holds us here

And far beyond, white sails on blue
Fading into the haze
I'm pausing here awhile
Wondering,
If we were to go,
Where would we sail?



Pictures at an exHERbition 2

Music and Text by Sally Whitwell

For Mezzo Soprano, SA Chorus, String Quartet and Piano

Composer's Note - Pictures at an exHERbition 2

Text and music by Sally Whitwell

Pictures at an exHERbition 2 is part of an ongoing project, a woman's answer to Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*. Songs in the cycles are responses to works by some of my personal favourite Australian women artists, in this case Constance Stokes, Dorrit Black, and Margaret Preston.

Sally Whitwell
January 2021

Further information on the artworks

1. Blades

Portrait of a woman in a green dress (1930) Constance Stokes
<https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/132965/>

2. Beat Song

Music (1927-1928) Dorrit Black
<https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/217.1976/>

3. Implement Blue

Implement Blue(1927) Margaret Preston
<https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/OA7.1960/>

Text

By Sally Whitwell

1. Blades

Emerald or jade?
Envy or innocence?
They don't call grasses 'blades' for nothing.

Is that a snake? No,
It's just a worm
Making rich the fertile earth

2. Beat Song

Verse chorus verse chorus...

Bridge!

And as I crossed,
I clicked on two and four
As instructed
Ropes are swaying
It's just a swing bridge
After all

Syncopated trickle
A neon flash of sun
And the beat in your feet of the
Verse, chorus, verse, chorus...

Bridge!

3. Implement Blue

Form and functionality
Simultaneous duality
Welcome to the plurality
Of the mechanical age

But it's not mutually exclusive
You can pinpoint the elusive,
If you just look a little closer
You can see her juxtapose her
Form with functionality
Her fantasy with reality

Embrace the plurality
Of the mechanical age.