

ETERNAL STRINGS ACROSS THE NATION

Senior Conservator at the National Museum, Robin Tait is a violinist who is passionately committed to keeping alive the sounds of the AE Smith instruments in the Museum's collection.

Robin's approach to conservation involves preserving the instruments and ensuring that they are also played. These are not silent objects kept for their physical beauty and material value. They continue their existence as living evidence of the achievements of one of Australia's most eminent violin makers.

Each year a concert features one or all of the Museum's AE Smith stringed instruments. In 2004 and 2005 the Carl Pini Quartet delighted Canberra audiences with Eternal Strings concerts in the Hall. Last year John Gould, accompanied by pianist Anne Stevens, presented a wonderful concert that featured the AE Smith viola. As the National Museum, it is important to make the collection accessible to audiences beyond Canberra. To assist us in enabling listeners across the country to hear our string quartet we decided to approach the ABC.

The Grainger Quartet with the instruments. Courtesy of the Grainger Quartet



Our relationship with the ABC developed when Sandy Forbes was acting Director of Media Affairs. She arranged for me to meet John Crawford, Director of ABC Classic FM, to talk about broadcasting an AE Smith concert. From the beginning, John was enthusiastic. He arranged for Patrick Carrick, ABC Classic FM's Scheduler, Live Music, to explain to me what would be required for a concert to be performed for an audience in the ABC's Eugene Goossens Hall in Sydney and broadcast live.

Fundamental to this exercise of course were the musicians and we were anxious to make our instruments accessible to new performers. Robin suggested the Grainger Quartet, a recently-formed group based in Sydney. Three members of this quartet were previously part of the Australian String Quartet and the cellist had been a member of the Tank Stream Quartet. They had a very good reputation.

When I rang Matilda Halliday, Administration and Marketing Manager for the Grainger Quartet, her reaction was immediately positive. She agreed to talk to the musicians about the proposal and when she rang me back a week or so later, she reported that they were very interested. Their final decision would depend upon their response to the instruments. Matilda explained that a string player has the same sort of relationship with an instruments as a rider has with a horse – complex and to a degree unpredictable.

Robin and I arranged to take the instruments to Sydney to meet the players. This felt like match making! Would they fall in love with each other? Would they want to form a significant relationship with one another? A meeting was arranged for 5 February.

As luck would have it, Robin was not available for the visit to Sydney which had to fit around the musicians' busy schedule including visits to Hong Kong where they are associated with the Hong Kong Sinfonietta. Fortunately the Museum's Manager Conservation, Eric Archer, was available. Early on Monday morning I met him at the repository in Mitchell where the cases containing our precious cargo were carefully packed in the back of a station wagon. Eric and I set off for Sydney, travelling with our eyes on the rear view mirror, making sure a fast car or thundering truck did not run into the back of us and destroy a significant part of the National Historical Collection.



National Museum Senior Conservator Robin Tait with the AE Smith instruments. Photos: Dragi Markovic

Meanwhile Matilda and the members of the Grainger Quartet were preparing to meet us at the City Recital Hall. It was important for the musicians to play the instruments in a concert acoustic. Matilda arranged access to the City Recital Hall because the Quartet were due to play their first public concert there on 29 March. At 10am they arrived: first violin Natsuko Yoshimoto, second violin James Cuddeford, viola player Jeremy Williams and cellist Patrick Murphy. Natsuko and James were already favourably disposed towards the instruments because they studied with Yehudi Menuhin who had owned an AE Smith violin.

The instruments lay in their cases on the stage. Eric and Matilda and I stood to one side, waiting with bated breath to hear what would happen. Each musician approached an instrument, taking them gently from their cases, examining them carefully and then tuning them, listening intently to their own particular sounds. It was a very serious process but gradually nods and smiles indicated that mutual attractions were taking place. Each musician played fragments from works I recognised – Natsuko demonstrating the superb sound of one of the violins with a brilliant section from a Prokofiev violin concerto that also displayed her passionate virtuosity.

Then they all sat down together and played some of the Beethoven 'Harp' Quartet followed by the Brahms Quartet no. 2, two works in their forthcoming March concert. It was clear that growing affection for the instruments had resulted in the decision to become engaged.

Eric and Matilda and I set off to report to ABC Classic FM the good news that the concert would go ahead and Patrick Carrick set a date. On 5 and 6 April Robin delivered the instruments to the houses of each of the musicians, checking to ensure that they would be safely stored and locked away when not being played. A rehearsal period of 5-6 weeks was necessary for each player to become better acquainted with the instruments.

The program suggested by the Quartet was selected to show off the range of AE Smith's instruments and to relate to their history. Haydn's 'Lark' Quartet was a typical classical piece, music Smith would have expected to hear from his creations. A Percy Grainger piece was included of course – the Arrival Platform Humlet, arranged by James Cuddeford. Compositions by John Cage and Joaquin Turina reflected the performers' interest in relatively unknown modern works. The concert concluded with Benjamin Britten's String Quartet no. 2, written in 1947, soon after the composer had visited a concentration camp with Yehudi Menuhin. This was also the year when one of the violins was made.

The concert was a great success, applauded enthusiastically by the Sydney audience and broadcast across Australia. Plans for another concert next year are already under way. We all hope that the marriage of the Grainger Quartet and the Museum's AE Smith collection will be a lasting one.

Gabrielle Hyslop
*Manager, Public Programs
 and Events*

