

Ensemble opportunities for young string players in Newcastle

Dr Anne Berry

There are many opportunities in Newcastle and the Hunter Region for young string players to gain ensemble experience besides those in the region's schools.

Newcastle Conservatorium (part of the University of Newcastle) runs a Community Music Program which includes private tuition as well as a variety of ensembles. I have been a Community Cello Teacher here for the last ten years and am also a director and tutor for The Conservatorium String Ensemble Program, which was well established prior to my arrival in Newcastle.

At present there are three string ensembles – Juniors, Intermediates and Seniors – that meet once a week for 90 minutes. The program is aimed at school-age children but also includes some tertiary students who attend for performance and teaching experience. These three ensembles give a concert at the end of each nine-week term.

Students are auditioned at the beginning of each year to give them a performance experience as well as to allocate them to the most suitable ensemble. The size, age groups and level of playing of these groups vary from time to time. At present, the groups are relatively small, which has the advantage of being able to give students personal attention but limits the repertoire which they can play. This year, each of the

groups has fluctuated between around six to fifteen players. Sporting activities like soccer are often a priority for young students and can affect attendance so ensemble directors need to be flexible in adjusting repertoire for the season.

The Juniors program at Newcastle Conservatorium is currently directed by Anthea Wikstrom who takes an energetic and holistic approach to her group. With skills in improvisation, Anthea incorporates this creative approach in developing rhythmic and tonal skills in her group. Students in this group are aged 6–10 years and are at AMEB Preliminary to Grade 2 level. Anthea believes that ensembles are equally as important as private tuition, that in ensembles students should have fun, make friends, learn to listen and sight-read. She commented on the importance of teachers having a flexible approach and an openness to continuing to learn. Her philosophy is stated thus: 'We have to teach children the beauty of music and how it connects with other souls. Music is one of the most beautiful experiences and languages ever created and, as educators with great diligence and patience, we must continue teaching this great art form to the next generation.' In 2020, Anthea hopes to take the Newcastle Conservatorium ensembles into retirement villages and nursing homes to bring joy to senior members of the community.

Rodney Wikstrom conducts the Intermediate group and his approach is more traditional. His choice of repertoire has challenged his group, particularly in learning to read complex rhythmic patterns and to have performance confidence. Students in this group are at approximately AMEB Grade 2–6 level. The students in these two groups have now become more advanced so it is anticipated that a new



Julie Bevan conducting the Junior Orchestra

beginners' group will commence next year. I am a cello tutor with these two groups and I also conduct them from time to time.

The Senior String Ensemble at the Conservatorium is directed by Olena Zaporezhets. Entry to this ensemble is by audition with a minimum level of AMEB Grade 7–8, good sight-reading ability and orchestral experience. Students must be in Year 7 or older to be eligible for this group. This is a small but very advanced group which performed a polished and musical rendition of Elgar's *Serenade for Strings*, Op. 20, at their 2019 end-of-year concert. Olena does not conduct this group – she has developed their fine ensemble skills where players listen and watch while being led by their concertmaster.

At the final Community Strings concert in 2019, the University of Newcastle Orchestra also made an appearance performing Mozart's *Symphony no. 40*. The University of Newcastle Orchestra is for musicians 16 years and over. Some members of the Senior Ensemble participated with this group.

Another flourishing string ensemble program in the region is Newcastle Strings. This organisation is led by Dr David Banney, a conductor, composer and violinist/violist. In addition to providing one-to-one tuition, this organisation provides a string ensemble program with the stated ethos: 'We believe that music education is enriched by the sense of

community and strong friendships that are formed in ensemble playing.'

David Banney has promoted and organised the teaching of Colourstrings in Australia, including visits by its founders, Csaba and Géza Szilvay. The influence of this philosophy can be found in David's compositions and arrangements for string ensemble, designed to consolidate basic skills using folk music, familiar tunes and rhythmic patterns. One example of this is his 'Tigers & Teapots' for which CD and sheet music are available, recorded by Waratah Girls' Choir and Christ Church Camerata.

Newcastle Strings is currently offering three levels of ensemble – Junior, Intermediate and Seniors – with a string quartet emerging from their Senior group. Their 2019 end-of-year concert featured arrangements of well-known composers such as Handel, Mozart and Bizet. The rich tone and musicality of these groups were evident with skilled freedom of the bow, good pitch and listening skills.

String students can sometimes be found in both the Conservatorium Ensembles and Newcastle Strings. Due to sporting commitments and other personal preferences, students sometimes swap between the groups. The advantage of this flexibility is in learning different skills from different teachers and making new friendships.



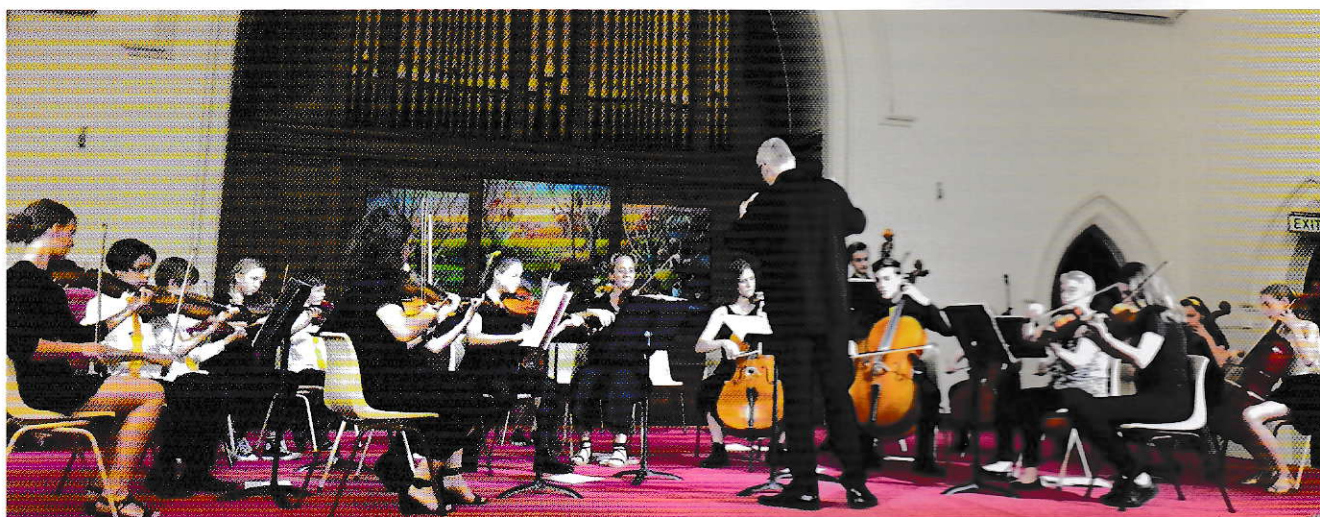
SIMPLYforSTRINGS

**Celebrating creativity
through musicality**

*Every strum, stroke and pluck reverberates
quality at Simply for Strings, and that's
music to our ears.*

-  Quality instrument and bow sales
-  Servicing & Repairs
-  Shop in store at Red Hill or Online

SIMPLYFORSTRINGS.COM.AU



Dr David Banney conducting Senior Orchestra

Another group contributing to string education is the Newcastle Suzuki Violin Studio directed by Nicole Cox. She teaches more than 60 violin students from the age of three. They hold an annual fundraising concert for John Hunter Children's Hospital. This year, their group sessions' ensemble skills have gained a boost from the professional conducting of Dr Ian Cook.

With the basic ensemble skills training provided by these three groups, string students are then well equipped to move on to more advanced and mixed instrumental groups. Having string-only groups in the beginner stages allows for string-friendly keys and a focus on string technique but playing in a full orchestra is exciting. Thus, the Newcastle Youth Orchestra (NYO) was established in 2013 by Jack Machin. Newcastle Youth Orchestra is an auditioned ensemble for musicians aged 14–25. An offshoot is the Newcastle Youth Chamber Ensemble for those aged 15–25 years and the program is fed by a Wind Orchestra and NYO Kids, a mixed ensemble conducted by Rodney Wikstrom for those aged 10–15. NYO was formed 'to motivate and inspire emerging young performers through a diverse and challenging repertoire of orchestral music. NYO aims to provide the highest quality music education and training in a stimulating and rewarding environment.'

In their final 2019 concert conducted by Dr Ian Cook, the Newcastle Youth Orchestra collaborated with the Avondale String Orchestra (directed by Dr Sohyun Eastham). This was the first year for this collaboration and the result was a fine concert which included an exciting rendition of Beethoven's Symphony no. 1 in C Major. This was an excellent choice of repertoire for this young ensemble, proven by its discipline, musicality, lovely phrasing and texture between instrumental voicings.

This collaboration between NYO and Avondale is part of a regional response by musicians to combine resources for the performance of larger works. Another example is the proposed collaboration for

the Newcastle Music Festival in August 2020 to perform Mahler's Symphony no. 1. This performance will include the Christ Church Camerata, NYO, Newcastle Strings and Newcastle Festival Strings (comprised of community members) joining in the final concert of the Annual Newcastle Music Festival.

The Christ Church Camerata was formed in 2009 under the direction of David Banney. Based at Newcastle's Christ Church Cathedral, this ensemble has been described as the region's most exciting chamber ensemble. With a core of fine string players, this group presents an annual subscription concert series featuring a variety of string orchestra repertoire, often including nationally and internationally known soloists. I am a member of the Camerata and am excited that they are now offering a cadetship program for outstanding young string players. This gives these young players the opportunity to play alongside Camerata members, thus gaining skills and experience.

Another opportunity for string players with a minimum of Grade 8 achievement has been the annual performance of the Lake Macquarie Philharmonic Orchestra (LMPO) under the direction of Chris Bearman. According to the organiser, Mercia Buck OAM, the aim of LMPO is to hire professional players. This year's concert featured Romantic ballet music, a fantastic opportunity to play real repertoire and a real work-out for these lucky young string players.

Dr Anne Berry currently teaches cello for the Newcastle Conservatorium's Community Music Program. She performs regularly and is a member of Newcastle's Christ Church Camerata. In Queensland, Anne was an AMEB Examiner from 1999–2009 and was awarded her PhD (Music Education and Pedagogy) from The University of Queensland in 2007.