This concert is dedicated to the memory of Peter Sculthorpe and will include a performance of Memento Mori.
On Friday of last week, the musicians and staff of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra were saddened to learn of the death of Peter Sculthorpe, one of Australia’s most prominent and distinguished composers and a leading creative voice in Australian music.

Sculthorpe was born in Launceston, but by the end of 1963 he was living in Sydney, lecturing at Sydney University and getting to know the players and the sound of the SSO. ‘You know, it’s our orchestra,’ he said in an interview in 2009. ‘Our city’s orchestra and therefore it means a great deal to me.

His creative relationship with the orchestra began in 1965 when Sir Bernard Heinze invited him to compose Sun Music I for the SSO to perform at the 1965 Commonwealth Arts Festival in London. This was our first international tour and Sculthorpe – who was just beginning to come to public attention – was chosen to represent Australian music.

As it turned out, Peter Sculthorpe was influential in establishing not so much an Australian style (all his composition students have their own distinctive voices) but a powerful sense of Australian identity. Peter McCallum says it best: Sculthorpe ‘defined what it meant to be an Australian composer to a society that had not previously realised it needed one.’

The Sun Music series could be said to have as its inspiration an image of Australia as a sun-baked landscape, although the gamelan sounds in Sun Music III reveal that by 1967 he was looking not only beyond Australia but beyond traditional European models. He’d already caused a stir, says biographer Graeme Skinner, by telling The Times: ‘Europe is the past; Australia, Indonesia, and the South Pacific the future.’ Japanese influences emerged in works such as Mangrove, which the SSO premiered in 1979 under then chief conductor Louis Frémaux. And as early as 1961, Irkanda IV signalled his interest in Australian indigenous culture, an interest that resulted more recently in collaborations with didjeridu player William Barton.

Another of Sculthorpe’s abiding interests – running parallel to the influence of the landscape and his strong sense of place – was his concern for the environment and the effects of our presence on the planet. Port Essington (1977) depicted an alienated European culture trying to survive in the north of Australia. Memento Mori (1993) was inspired by the despoliation of Easter Island. It was, he said, a memento mori (‘remember that you will die’) for the planet, and he incorporated into the music his discovery that the 17th-century astronomer Kepler had regarded the oscillation of the semitone interval A flat–G as the sound of the planet Earth.

In 1969 John Hopkins commissioned Love 200 – a ‘crazed yet elegant’ work for vocalist, rock band and orchestra, featuring Jeannie Lewis and the band Tully. It was premiered in a Town Hall Proms concert the following year, embracing, writes Doug Wallen, ‘the possibilities of improvised psychedelic and prog music without neglecting the powers of classical’. This turned out to be just the beginning of Sculthorpe’s association with...
SSO youth programming. His music became a regular feature in what is now Meet the Music and we commissioned two works specifically for the Education Program: Little Nourlangie and From Uluru. Appearing in pre-concert talks before Meet the Music in 2009, he was besieged by school children wanting his autograph!

When Peter Sculthorpe turned 60 in 1989, we presented a special birthday concert conducted by then chief conductor Stuart Challender. It featured the Australian premiere of Kakadu as well as music by other composers Sculthorpe admired: Takemitsu, Grainger and Varèse. That same year we also made a landmark recording of his major orchestral works, including Irkanda IV (with concertmaster Donald Hazelwood) and Small Town (with principal oboist Guy Henderson), as well as Earth Cry, Mangrove and Kakadu.

Kakadu had been commissioned by an American and was first performed in the Aspen Music Festival. And yet it was imbued with Sculthorpe’s fondness for his hometown orchestra. It contains a very long and beautiful cor anglais solo because, he once explained, ‘there was a wonderful cor anglais player in the SSO at the time, Karel Lang, and it was really written for him.’ Even when writing for other orchestras, he said, ‘I often think of players I know in the SSO, just because I know them. And in doing it, one’s heart is more in the piece.’

Peter Sculthorpe’s music is full of heart. And he was always unswervingly melodic in his instincts, even during his early career, at a time when many composers were pursuing aggressive high modernism. Musicians and audiences warmed to his music. But, and this is one of the many reasons why he will be sorely missed, he was also a man of tremendous generosity, kindness, good humour and enthusiasm. He was an inspiring presence to all who came in contact with him, both musicians and staff. Nearly everyone in the SSO family has a fond memory of Peter Sculthorpe to treasure.

He received many awards and honours in his lifetime but considered one of the most important his being named a National Living Treasure in 1997. We will feel his loss keenly, but he remains a national treasure with an extraordinarily rich musical legacy, and the contribution he has made to Australian culture is an imperishable one. Tonight we pay tribute in the best way we can – through music.

13, 15, 16 AUGUST 2014

Visit bit.ly/SculthorpeTributePinboard for an online tribute of articles, photographs and audio-visual materials.
Peter Sculthorpe was famous for his shiny red MG. Pictured here with composer Peggy Glanville-Hicks in the late 1980s.

Earlier this year, Peter Sculthorpe was asked what he thought happens to us after we die. His answer revealed his grounding in both music and spirituality: “I don’t know – I’ve always liked to think that one would flow into an eternal harmony.”