



APHRODITE

20—28 JUN

SYDNEY CHAMBER OPERA, CARRIAGEWORKS
IN ASSOCIATION WITH OMEGA ENSEMBLE
WORLD PREMIERE

JACK SYMONDS

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR, SYDNEY CHAMBER OPERA

It's with immense pride that Sydney Chamber Opera premieres major US composer Nico Muhly's fourth opera, *Aphrodite*, written specifically for us and Omega Ensemble to perform together. This opera represents everything SCO does best — uniting extraordinary artists from music and theatre, allowing them to create works of unique ambition and realising them with passion and precision: an ultimate chamber music experience writ large on the operatic stage. Muhly's previous operas have been written for the New York Metropolitan Opera — the world's largest opera house, and now *Aphrodite* is written for SCO — probably the world's smallest — though if ever any more evidence was needed that we punch above our weight artistically, I can't imagine what it would be.

This creative team led by Alexander Berlage has been inspired by Muhly's trademark ecstatic, pulsing and brilliantly-written music and Melbourne playwright Laura Lethlean's sharp libretto and has created a biting contemporary world for the two extraordinary singers to inhabit, fuelled by our first collaboration with Omega Ensemble's instrumentalists and supported, as ever, by our long and fruitful residency at Carriageworks.

FERGUS LINEHAN **CEO, CARRIAGEWORKS**

For over a decade, Sydney Chamber Opera has been one of the most vital creative forces at Carriageworks. Their commitment to 20th and 21st century repitore and their emphasis on premiering new music, has enriched our city's musical life immeasurably.

Aphrodite, by the remarkable Nico Muhly, is the latest chapter in this story; a work that once again confirms SCO's ability to attract artists of international calibre while remaining deeply connected to local audiences and collaborators. The fact that so many artists and companies are eager to collaborate with the company is testament to their generosity, vision, and collaborative spirit.

We are proud to call them a resident company and to continue supporting their extraordinary journey.

APHRODITE

WORLD PREMIERE

Music: Nico Muhly

Libretto: Laura Lethlean

Conductor: Jack Symonds

Director & Lighting Designer: Alexander Berlage

Set & Costume Designer: Isabel Hudson

Video Designer: Morgan Moroney

Ava: Jessica O'Donoghue

Aphrodite: Meechot Marrero

OMEGA ENSEMBLE:

Clarinet & Artistic Director: David Rowden

Violin 1: Véronique Serret

Violin 2: Mark Ingwersen

Viola: Neil Thompson

Cello: Paul Stender

Piano: Vatche Jambazian

Percussion: Rebecca Lloyd-Jones

Technical Director: Damion Holling

Camera Operator: Mitchell Riley

Stage Manager: Georgiane Deal

Assistant Conductor: Huw Belling

Assistant Director: Zoë Hollyoak

Surtitles: Alexander Maltas

Head Electrician: Suzy Brooks

Head Mechanist: Stephen Crossley

Mechanist: Jan Goldfelder

Systems Technician: Chloe Langdon

Wigs: Annabel Cameron

Aphrodite is commissioned by John Claudianos for
Sydney Chamber Opera & Omega Ensemble

Production supported by Judith Neilson AM

Cameras supplied by Phoenix Central Park

Piano sponsored by Kawai Pianos Australia

SYNOPSIS

Late at night, Ava returns to her hotel room, after attending the launch of a new Netflix documentary, based on her best-selling book *The Aphrodite Complex*.

Alone, in a foreign city, Ava grapples with the aftershock of her recent divorce. She fantasies about Hector, a young Director of Photography, she met whilst filming in Greece.

Catching glimpses of herself in the hotel mirrors, perceiving only her insecurities, Ava begins to spiral. She pours herself a drink from the mini bar and tries to distract herself. Late-night beauty advertisements stream into her room and she cannot help but compare herself to the younger, more desirable women on screen.

From Ava's self-loathing manifests a goddess. Both mythical apparition and subconscious entity, Aphrodite joins Ava in the hotel room...

Ava has become intoxicated by the same mythology to which she was once so sure she was immune.



COMPOSER'S NOTE

NICO MUHLY

Setting Laura's words was an exercise in learning to let them sing on their own - getting out of the way when necessary and amplifying them when they needed to soar. Alex Berlage, attached to the project from the get-go, arrived with very clear ideas about a framing device for the story, which can often be stressful but in this case was quite liberating. I found myself writing out of order, latching on to turns of phrase which were often visually evocative: "two rivers, flowing into one," "only looking, never touching," "the gathering of thunder." Laura's writing for Ava vacillates between seeing her as an expert, an academic, a dry and rational thinker. This suggested a pulse-based music: procedural and direct. Then, when she goes internal, the words suggested something more fragile, dizzy, and unmoored. Aphrodite herself, though, has the most direct and forceful music, very much in angry collaboration with the instrumentalists. Eventually, all these three music's merge.

LIBRETTIST'S NOTE

LAURA LETHLEAN

What does becoming the 'most beautiful' mean for a woman? Does beauty bestow power?

When asked to be a part of this project, I was given two directions: write a libretto for two female performers, and make it about Aphrodite.

This task sparked a curiosity about the technology of story. As I researched the myth of Aphrodite, I became interested in the way myths can carry lessons and values that shape our culture, and indeed, go on to shape the very way we perceive reality.

It struck me that while what I assumed was true (among all the goddesses, Aphrodite was the 'most beautiful') I didn't know the

origins of Aphrodite lay in the very first deities. Way before Zeus, the myth of Aphrodite was shaping human culture. The very first city between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers worshipped a goddess of fertility. They called her Ishtar and later Astarte, and this same goddess was later worshipped as Aphrodite. So why then, did I only know the stories about her beauty? Why had that part of her character survived into modern day, while other aspects of her powers had fallen away? What does that say about our current culture, about the values embedded within the stories we continue to tell each other?

This libretto explores these questions through the character of Ava, an academic and broadcaster who finds herself plunged into sudden fame when her book, 'the Aphrodite Complex' gets picked up and made into a popular documentary. Although she is an expert on the mythology of the original 'most beautiful' goddess, she finds she remains vulnerable to questions about her own beauty, power, and human connection.

This program note, like the project itself, has been written across continents and time zones. While I wrote the libretto from Melbourne, Nico was composing from all over the world. Sometimes he'd be in LA, sometimes New York, others Singapore, Dubai, London. As I worked on drafts, he travelled the world, transforming the words I sent into stunning music, transcending my attempts at textual expression. Each time I had the pleasure of hearing his composition, I was enchanted by his interpretation. I know you will be too.

What an honour it has been to explore this subject matter with such a talented and hard working team. The skill and expertise of all involved is enough to give anyone imposter syndrome. As you experience *Aphrodite*, know you are in safe hands. In fact, the music, the performances, and the visuals prove that beauty is indeed powerfully real, but that the power that resides in beauty comes to us in a multitude of forms.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

ALEXANDER BERLAGE

This is not a retelling of mythology, but a conversation with it. Aphrodite holds a mirror to history – its ideals, its myths – and reflects back our enduring, deeply human hunger: to be beautiful, to be desired, to be enough.

At its centre is Ava, a writer and filmmaker navigating the blurred line between myth and reality. Acclaimed for *The Aphrodite Complex* (her bestselling book, now a documentary series) Ava begins as the observer: critical, composed, in control. But slowly, seductively, she is drawn into the goddess's myth.

The glow of admiration touches her skin and she wants more. What begins as analysis becomes embodiment. Her image begins to fracture.

This opera interrogates the stories we inherit and the ideals we chase: how identity, beauty, and worth are shaped by the myths we uphold and the images we project. From the marble pedestal to the filtered screen, the pressures remain. We long to be remembered, to be loved, to be seen – and are taught that perfection is the currency of value. But what if enough was never the point?

In this world premiere by Nico Muhly and Laura Lethlean, Aphrodite becomes a lens through which we examine our cultural fixation with desirability. What we see in the mirror is not just a face, but the weight of history, mythology and social expectation. Like the golden apple once awarded to the most beautiful, beauty still demands a prize – and we keep competing for it.

We may not be able to rewrite the myth, but we can choose how we reframe it.

[Click here for cast and creative team biographies](#)

ABOUT CARRIAGEWORKS

Carriageworks is one of Australia's most significant creative industry hubs, renowned for its dynamic cultural events, performances, and exhibitions. Housed in a historic railway workshop in Sydney, Carriageworks offers a vibrant platform for opera, theatre, music, dance and more, collaborating with leading local and international artists to foster innovation and creativity in its distinctive industrial setting.



CARRIAGEWORKS TEAM

BOARD

Michael Gonski (Chair), Andrew Maiden, Tony Nimac, Gitanjali Bhalla, Cameron Honey, Robi Stanton, Laura Berry, Jake Thomson

OFFICE

Jessica Abrahams, Marsela Ardi, Rodrigo Arriaza, Ray Baker, Chantel Bann, William Brownley, Cameron Brown, Susan Bui, Michelle Cao, Emma Carson, Camilla Chapman, Miranda Cookman, Jacqueline De La Rosa, Lauren Dannenberg, Andrew Demetriou, Nicole Espinoza, Electra Foley, Marissa Giannone, Courtney Giles, Georgina Grisold, Kurtis Hammer, Dominic Hamra, Debbie Higgison, Claire Hicks, Vicky Hopper, Chloe King, Kri Leitner, Ollie Lee, TingTing Li, Fergus Linehan, Cynthia Loh, Eleanor McLeod, Felix May, Priyanka Martin, Dylan Medina, Francisca Pena, Janine Peukert, Luke Pidgeon, Tuneah Plumb, Kisook Park, Kaylee Rankin, Grant Richards, Georgina Ryke, Alexandra-Cateluta Sava, Hannah Spencer, Adrian Burnett, Jack Audas Preston, Jared Wilson, Jonathan Zhang.

FOH

Lotte Beckett, Matt Bostock, Felicity Brading, Rosemary Callingham, Jasmine Cain, Michael Collins, Eliza Cooper, Genevieve Craig, Claire De Luca, Lewis Defina, Nikita Dunovits-Ferrier, James Fisher, Issac Forsyth, Bridget Fung, Chloe Geary, Edmund Gock, Salvador Gonzalez, Natesha Ham, Zoe Hamra, Lucie Heseltine, Lucy Heffernan, Thomas Hodge, Meg Hyeronimus, Asif Imtiaz, Lauren Kenyon, Alexandra Malcolm, Jo Messina, Cassidy McDeremott Smith, Sarah Muttalak, Isabella Niven, Ezara Norton, Louisa Polson, Lorcan Power, Noah Rayner, Drew Reddy, Helio Russell, Eloise Sacco-Tranter, Amelia Seddon, Greeshma Shetty, Keira Sinclair, Kate Smytheman, James Ryan, Evalyn Sharpham, Shannon Thompson, Jessica Tahana, Uma Volkmer, Gitana Vasaityte, Thi Van, Oscar Veliks, Ya An Wang, Bianca Watkins, Ella Watson-Heath, Emma Whitehead, Josephine Witherdin, Charles Wu, Sarah Wu, Bianca Yeung, Strickland Young, Zara Suine

BOH

Abraham Box, Sandra Bardwell, Helen Baker, Oliver Brownbill, Helena Cazouris, Joshua Churchill, Perry Edgington, Maddison Goyen, Craig Hull, Thomas Jones-Ceissman, Ka Yuan Lai, Lucia McAlister, Gregory Nicholl, Caspar Nolan-Evans, Nahar Pleshet, Olivia Pilot, Milos Popovic, James Rawlings, Louie Roberts, Damian Taylor, Mady Thieme, Georgina Tosswill, Aaron Van Dyck, Jade Walker, Joshua Winestock.

BOX OFFICE

Kate Buchanan, Natalie Elliott, Hugo Fraser, Ava Lagoon-Robinson, Jamille Lemes, Michail Mathioudakis, Eddy O'Leary, Eric Qian, Kevin Tran, Emma Whitehead

SYDNEY CHAMBER OPERA

Artistic Director: Jack Symonds

Principal Artistic Associate: Huw Belling

Production Manager: Damion Holling

Artistic Associates: Danielle Maas, Jane Sheldon, Mitchell Riley, James Wannan, Pierce Wilcox

BOARD

Christine Williams (Chair), Ban-Foo Leong (Treasurer), Patrick Nolan, Jane Rotsey, Jack Symonds, James Williams

APHRODITE 2025 SUPPORTERS

Lead Producer: Judith Neilson AM

Executive Producers: John Barrer, Neil Burns, John Claudianos, Penelope Seidler AM, Kim Williams AM, Anonymous (2)

Associate Producers: John Kaldor AM, Julian Lloyd-Phillips, The Russell Mills Foundation, Dr. Robert Mitchell, Emeritus Prof. Marilyn Sleight, Christine Williams, James & Clytie Williams, Prof. Emerita Di Yerbury AO, Anonymous (3)

Producers: Andrew Andersons AO, William Brooks & Alasdair Beck, John Garran, Glynis Johns, Josephine Key, James Alexander & Kathir Ponnusamy, Patricia Richardson in memory of Andy Lloyd-James

Production Supporters: Antoinette Albert, Gillian Appleton, Angela Bowne SC, Phillip Cornwell, Elizabeth Evatt, Brendan McPhillips, Janet Nash, Trevor Parkin, Colin Spencer

Thanks to: Greg Murphy Scenery, George Aviet Staging, MiProduction, Intense Lighting, Bangarra Dance Company, Raw Energy Productions

OMEGA ENSEMBLE

CEO & Executive Producer: David Boyce

Associate Producer, Touring and Events: Ariel Bonnell

Associate Producer, Projects: Dominic Lui

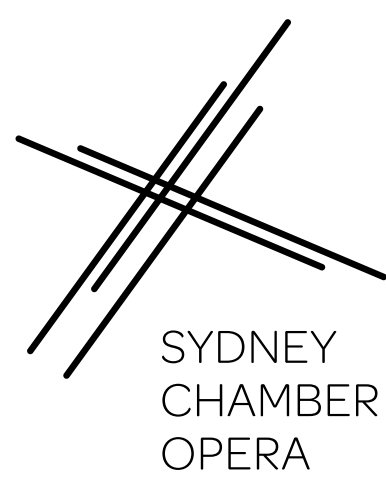
Marketing and Content Manager: Ben Robinson

BOARD

Norman Gillespie (Chair), Phillipa Birkett, Zach Fraser, Rory Jeffes, Julie Robb, David Rowden, Brigitte Uren, Matthew Yeldham

Photography Credit: Daniel Boud & Jordan Munns

Presenting Partners



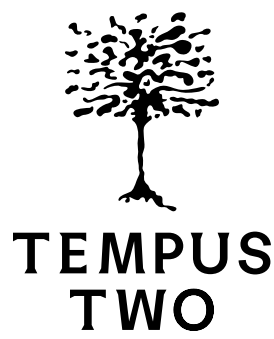
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