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Felicity Davies

Taken under his swing

Drummer and conductor Troy Miller finds joy in collaboration.
By Jane Cornwell

Tall and lithe, with a dark swoosh of hair, Troy Miller leads the way through his house and out into his studio with the same elegant ease he applies to conducting the London Concert Orchestra, the London Philharmonia and the BBC Symphony. Having seen him lead these and other ensembles through the years, it occurs that even Miller's jumper-clad shoulder blades feel reassuringly familiar.

"A sense of togetherness is what matters," he'll say of the musicians massed under his dancing baton. "You want an orchestra to sound like one instrument. If you've done your job well in the rehearsal and communicated what you're after, then they probably don't need you as much."

Guest singers including Laura Mvula, however, continue to rely on Miller's direction, even if it's just a raised eyebrow, a reassuring nod of encouragement. The British soul jazz diva will be looking to Miller for cues when she joins American vocalist Jose James for *Gershwin Reimagined*, Miller's acclaimed tribute to the popular 20th-century composer, which makes its Australian premiere with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra as part of the Melbourne International Jazz Festival and plays in Perth with the West Australian Symphony Orchestra a few days later.

It's a sunny morning in Middlesex, west of London, and Miller's first day off in he doesn't know how long. For the past few weeks, he has been on the road with former Police drummer Stewart Copeland, delivering orchestral arrangements of music from the latter's career. Before that he was on production duties for albums by vocalist Emeli Sande and singer-pianist Jamie Cullum, rearranging Gershwin for a Royal Festival Hall concert featuring Mvula, singer Shaun Escoffery and the Philharmonia Orchestra, and teaching at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, where once upon a time he studied.

What with these and other activities — co-writing and producing the Calvin Harris hit *Giant* featuring Rag'n'Bone Man, playing drums on a clutch of recording sessions, being a hands-on father of four — it's no wonder Miller is still in bed when I arrive, having multi-tasked himself into a sleep coma. Waiting downstairs in a living room where the bookshelves contain more than one Bible, I'm reminded of Miller's Christian faith and how he played drums, piano and violin in church as a child growing up in Bedfordshire.

"He's a church-fearing man and you best fear him," Amy Winehouse declared of Miller, her drummer, close friend and rock, introducing her band to the crowd at the 2008 Glastonbury Festival.

Miller, 43, whose rear view I glimpse as he slips into the kitchen, turns out to be as calm and centred as the *Back to Black* singer allegedly was not, even if initially mortified to have forgotten our interview. "And I'm so looking forward to Australia!" he says, bringing coffee. "While I've been there twice" — on drums for jazz veteran Roy Ayers, then for hitmaker Mark Ronson — "this is my first time conducting."

Miller began building his studio, a dozen loose-limbed strides across his garden, in 2007. But it wasn't until 2011, not long after the troubled, gifted Winehouse died of alcoholic poisoning, that he decided to extend the space and concentrate on producing and songwriting. Grief was definitely a factor, he says, looking around rooms crammed with drums, guitars, a grand piano, several vintage keyboards and a gear geek's worth of outboard equipment.

"I often felt that Amy wasn't aware of the extent of her fame, which got especially confusing when you brought drugs and alcohol into the equation," he says. "She'd be onstage in front of 90,000 people and act as if they were in her front room, then she'd be in her front room and act as if she was in front of 90,000 people. It was helpful for her to have level-headed people around."

"Towards the end, none of us were drinking in the dressing-rooms. We believed in her and tried to be supportive but it wasn't to be." He pauses for a beat. "When she passed, I felt bitter disappointment at losing a friend, and real disillusionment with the music industry. I thought, 'Why am I doing this?' I decided to concentrate on other stuff. Six months on, I met Laura."

Birmingham-born Mvula, 33, first piqued attention in 2012 with an EP that won her high-profile slots on the likes of *The Graham Norton Show*. After Miller played drums on her 2013 debut album, *Sing to the Moon*, she became a frequent visitor to his studio (he produced her song *Little Girl Blue* for the soundtrack of the 2013 film *12 Years a Slave*). When *Sing to the Moon* was re-recorded at Abbey Road Studios in 2014 in collaboration with the Metropole Orkest (conducted by Jules Buckley), it was with Miller producing. Mvula performed the work at the Royal Albert Hall as part of the BBC Proms that same year.

"I found a kindred spirit in Laura, which opened up a lot of things," says Miller. "Not least the orchestral stuff, which had been lying dormant for 20 years."

Orchestral collaborations suited them both, Miller with his Guildhall degree in orchestral percussion and jazz ("I did a term of conducting but realised I was more interested in writing for an orchestra than participating"), and Mvula, a multi-instrumentalist, with her studies in composition from the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire. A shared love of the work of Gershwin found them at the 2015 Cheltenham Jazz Festival, onstage alongside Grammy-winning crooner Gregory Porter, soul-jazz artist Eska and *X Factor* graduate Rebecca Ferguson, all erstwhile Miller collaborators. The BBC Concert Orchestra added colour and grandeur while — vitally for Miller — keeping the integrity of the songs.

"I wanted to create something symphonic that was familiar and incorporated singers," says Miller, who particularly loves arranging for strings. "Gershwin was a good place to start. Because there have been so many versions of his songs over the years, the challenge was to do something different."

What hadn't been done, he felt, were contemporary classical interpretations of the likes of *S Wonderful*, *I Got Rhythm* and *Embraceable You*.

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"I've drawn influences from everyone from Aaron Copland, Stravinsky and Elgar to Benjamin Britten to John Williams, who I identify with because I love film music." A smile. "For the Australian shows we're including a suite of five movements that Gershwin called *Catfish Row*, and Jose James" — a New York City artist with a honeyed baritone — "is going to sing *Summertime* with Laura."

Initially hailed as a new Nina Simone, Mvula has been open about her experiences of anxiety ("Before I go onstage I want to die," she told BBC News), and the painful divorce that would eventually make her stronger. She channelled such raw, honest subject matter into hits including *Overcome* and *Phenomenal Woman* from her second studio album, 2016's *The Dreaming Room*, which was produced by Miller and featured members of the London Symphony Orchestra.

"A broad feat of traditional and technical musicality," opined *The New York Times* of a work distinguished by unusual arrangements and nominated, like its predecessor, for Britain's prestigious Mercury Music Prize.

Sales didn't translate; Sony records dropped Mvula from the label. Again she turned to Miller. In 2017, Mvula and the London Symphony Orchestra played to a sold-out Barbican, the singer resplendent in an emerald gown with a tumbling tulle train that frothed up around her as she sat at a piano, pouring out her heart on her hymnal *Show Me Love* ("Can I reach deep inside myself? Pull out the gold?"), while Miller faced the orchestra, baton raised, hands and wrists fluid.

"I'm proud of where Laura and I arrived conceptually with *The Dreaming Room*," he says now.

"We worked so hard to cultivate a new cohesive sound. I always try and access a childlike, intuitive spirit in the artists I work with, digging deep and pushing as much as I can without making anyone uncomfortable, and always keeping a healthy respect for the heritage of different styles. But this paved the way I approach other producing and writing environments."

Miller's own musical influences embrace the music he grew up with: Bob Dylan, Bob Marley, Jimi Hendrix, Queen. Classical music. Gospel. He dedicated "thousands of hours" as a teenager to pursuing the roots of jazz. His belief in God, he says, binds everything together, informing his work and elevating the music, as it has informed his life as a child, the third of four siblings born to an architect and housewife who encouraged their children's musicality; the adolescent Miller was handwriting Bach-inspired scores and reached the finals of the BBC Young Musician of the Year competition (he released a solo album, *40 Days*, in 2006).

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British musician Laura Mvula

John Dempster

course a lot of orchestral music is sacred music. The common thread for me is the message. Whether I'm working with orchestras or with someone like Rag'n'Bone Man" — whose vertiginous height saw him ducking into Miller's studio — "it is about what's edifying and uplifting. It all connects."

Emanating the sense of surety that comes from unwavering faith, it's no wonder that Miller is often asked for emotional support by some of the musicians he works with, or to take on a role of counsellor as well as bandmate or producer. "Amy was definitely interested in talking about a spiritual world because she was open to everything and anyone she felt was being themselves. We'd talk about Jesus in the same few sentences that she confessed to me she was a white witch," he says.

"I'm interested in people and genuinely love elevating the artists I work with. Plus they'll often come here to my studio for meetings, and it's all very unpretentious. I have my family here" — he gestures towards his house — "and they see that while I'm serious about what I do, I don't take myself too seriously."

Still, not all Miller's ideas have wings: "I was working with Amy in a recording studio in Saint Lucia around the time of their [2009] jazz festival," he says of Winehouse, who spent a few months in the Caribbean nation to distance herself from London's temptations while trying to write material for her third album.

"Patti Labelle and Chaka Khan, who I've worked with before, happened to be staying in the house next door. One day I said to Amy, 'Why don't we knock and get Patti and Chaka to join us in a session?' And Amy just stormed off, saying 'Oh yeah, great, let's just have a big party' and we didn't see her again that day."

He laughs at the memory. "I think perhaps there was a bit of insecurity there. You had to be sensitive about making suggestions even though in the real world they seemed totally plausible and exciting."

Mvula, however, is among the many repeat collaborators who appreciate Miller's task mastery: "Learning the songs for *Gershwin Reimagined* pushed me way harder than I expected to be pushed," she has said. "This is music that moves you, takes you back in time but doesn't stay in one place. Troy Miller is genius at making you feel all kinds of different emotions, of finding new and interesting ways of saying things we've already heard before."

Having finished her new album, now Sande is keen to team up with Miller as conductor-arranger and one of his go-to orchestras: "She's very passionate about it. Each artist has a different reason for wanting to work with an orchestra, but every artist wants to feel like they're evolving in a certain way," says Miller, who has included musicians from the London Symphony on Cullum's forthcoming record, *Taller*.

But while orchestral collaborations have become almost de rigueur for artists of substance, for elder artists wanting reviving, Miller still enjoys playing drums as much as he ever did; he says drumming keeps him sharp in the studio. Not long after our interview, I catch him playing a jazz festival with Mvula and her five-piece band, Mvula wielding a white keytar, Miller following the groove, thrashing out the occasional rhytmical solo.

"My pay-off is helping these people find joy and expression," he says with a grin. "At the end of the day, it doesn't matter which way I'm facing."

Gershwin Reimagined plays from Friday to June 1 at Melbourne International Jazz Festival, then June 7 at Perth Concert Hall.



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