



From left:
Deborah
Cheetham
Fraillon
performing in
Sydney's
Domain; in the
gardens of the
Sydney
Conservatorium;
William Barton
performs in
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NCA Newswire / Gaye Gerard



Newswire / Nikki Short

“

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huge statement. They've gone beyond being inclusive, a fraught word, and are thinking about being representative of what Australia is, who First Nations musicians are in the classical music space.”

After Edinburgh, the MSO will tour Europe for the first time in a decade, taking in chief conductor and artistic adviser Jaime Martin's hometown of Santander, Spain, Merano in the Italian alps and Hamburg, Germany, where the original program will be reframed under the banner *Breath of Life from Down Under*. It will make its BBC Proms debut at London's Royal Albert Hall on August 29 with *Haunted Hills*, a symphonic poem by late 20th century Australian composer Margaret Sutherland, reflecting the joy and subsequent mistreatment and despair of the Bunurong and Woiworing people of the Kulin Nation/Dandenong Ranges. That work sits alongside Dvorak's *Symphony No. 6* and Tchaikovsky's *Piano Concerto No. 1*.

Australians will experience *Treaty* live with its national premiere on November 27 in Melbourne, when it prefaces Dvorak's famed *Symphony No. 9 From the New World*. Cheetham Fraillon says of the MSO's Indigenous programming. “At the beginning of every concert they play the *Acknowledgement of Country* piece they commissioned from me in 2020. This says we play our music on the lands of the Bpangerang, Wadawurrung and all those countries that make up parts of Victoria where MSO play, and guess what? We're still playing *Pictures at an Exhibition*, and Elgar, and Beethoven more than anybody else. You're not losing out.

“We still play this core European repertoire, which mostly comes from a 40-year-period in the 1800s and mostly from Germany, that we know our audiences love. But we are confident enough in who we are to also commission new works and play them not only once but a number of times.”

The MSO tour follows one of the most tumultuous periods in the history of the MSO, which recorded an operating deficit of \$1.9 million in 2024 and is making some management positions redundant. While Cheetham Fraillon alludes to a recent change of management, a legal drama behind the scenes is still playing out.

On August 11, 2024, while guesting with the MSO, London-based Australian classical pianist Jayson Gillham played *Witness*, a new composition by Australian composer Connor D'Netto commemorating journalists killed in the Israel-Gaza conflict.

In unauthorised onstage comments, Gillham accused Israel of carrying out “targeted assassinations” of prominent journalists. The MSO cancelled a subsequent concert featuring Gillham, but following a backlash from its musicians and some subscribers, it conceded the cancellation was an “error”.

Then managing director Sophie Galaise departed soon after and there was a board shakeup, with long-time board chair David Li being replaced by Edgar Myer. Galaise subsequently reached a Fair Work financial settlement with MSO, while Gillham has taken legal action against the orchestra in the Federal Court, alleging discrimination based on his political views. Arguing that Gillham's freelance status makes him exempt from legal protection, the MSO failed to have the lawsuit thrown out of court. The trial begins on December 1, 2025.

Tension, drama, hope and uncertainty all strafe the large orchestral forces that deliver *Treaty*.

“Victoria, my home state, is marching forward toward a treaty process; other states that were on the journey have abandoned the process toward a treaty after some 20 years of progress,” says Cheetham Fraillon, who began composing from scratch, with pencil, paper and piano, in her home music studio: “I thought about it for a long time then began notating sketches for a few weeks then began the orchestration.

“That's an exciting process, thinking not just about the colours of the instruments in the orchestra but having the luxury of knowing the players from the MSO.

“I'd think about what I knew of the incredible strengths of the individual section leaders and also the principal artists and my dear friend William Barton, who is a master of his instrument in the same way as other celebrated classical musicians who travel the world are.”

She finished the work in April in New York on a brief visit to watch her wife conduct the final rehearsals and opening night of the New York Ballet's Spring Season opener, before returning to Australia to direct a revival of her opera *Parrwang Lifts the Sky*, a creation story of the sunrise, at the Sydney Conservatorium. She's looking forward to the moment Martin and the MSO lift the music of *Treaty* off the page for the first time.

“It's an invitation for the audience to understand better where our worlds intersect, or even that we are living separate lives in what is in fact one world. I have to keep pursuing my belief that the arts help us to be an emotionally mature nation and part of that emotional maturity is to come to terms with our shared beginnings and heal the wounds.”

She leans in again. “The future really should look a whole lot brighter than the past has been.”

The MSO's European tour begins in Edinburgh on August 22 and concludes in London on August 29.

referendum process left her creatively mute for months. “It was a divisive campaign that unfortunately served to embolden people who want to come at you with nothing but hate and negativity,” she says. “It is not easy to hate, and it is certainly not easy to be hated. But for Australia it was a missed opportunity, which is the gentlest way I can put it.”

Now comes the stand-alone *Treaty*, after *Baparripna* the second movement in Cheetham Fraillon's forthcoming three-part concerto. Featuring Barton's playing, *Treaty* will make its world premiere at Scotland's Edinburgh International Festival on August 22, in a program that includes Elgar's *In the South* and Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*. (Composer, vocalist and multi-instrumentalist, Barton will perform a solo show the next day).

Edinburgh International Festival director Nicola Benedetti told *Review* in June that when programming such a major cultural event, talking about internationalism wasn't enough. “It's incredibly important that our international curiosity extends beyond Beethoven and Mahler,” she said. Cheetham Fraillon nods.

“It is unusual programming (by the MSO),” she says. “It is also a