



# MADE TO ORDER

Ever thought how great it would be to have a work of art or piece of music created especially for you? *Leta Keens* explores the world of private commissions.

Photography Nick Cubbin

**W**hen Julian Burnside commissions a piece of music, it's irrelevant to him whether he likes it or not. "It doesn't worry me at all," says the Melbourne QC and refugee advocate, "and I never give any kind of brief. It's particularly pleasing, though, if it turns out to be a good work that other people like."

Unlike most commissions, which are for personal use only, Burnside's have a more altruistic focus. Over the past 10 years, the longtime supporter of the visual arts has commissioned a dozen or so pieces of music. It all started when someone from Musica Viva, of which he's a board member, suggested he do so. "I've always been interested in the fact that artists have a hard time making a living and I realised how difficult it was for composers."

Most of the works are by emerging composers but Burnside says every now and then "it's nice to commission a work by someone famous". And that's how he accepted Musica Viva's invitation to commission Peter Sculthorpe's Sixteenth String Quartet, which was played nationally last year by the Tokyo String Quartet. "I was thrilled when I knew Julian was involved," says Sculthorpe. "He's a man I admire so much. It made a difference to

how I approached it."

The two didn't consult before the composer got to work nor, says Burnside, were there progress reports along the way. That's how it is with most commissions, which now make up the bulk of Sculthorpe's output. His acclaimed work *Kakadu* was commissioned by an American academic to celebrate his wife's 60th birthday.

When starting on Burnside's piece, Sculthorpe happened on a copy of *From Nothing to Zero*, a book of letters by asylum seekers in detention centres. The composer knew he'd found his inspiration. "I thought it was a very good piece," says Burnside, who's generally sent a score of each completed work but doesn't read music. "I was touched that Peter had, without any urging from me, adopted a theme that's obviously close to my heart. As well as having helped add to the body of fine chamber music, it's put a little memorial there to an important part of our history."

Katherine Strover's approach to commissioning is far more personal – she's had a one-off hat made every year since 1992, when she had a job with Melbourne's Spring Racing Carnival. "Our hats and outfits had to be perfect," she says. "You had to be organised and know what you were wearing by July. The funny thing with milliners, though, is no matter how early you order a hat you



still only get it the day before you need it.”

One of the great benefits of any commission is that you're getting something no one else has and, for that reason, it almost always costs more than the equivalent off-the-shelf item. Buying this way, says Stover, can also be “excruciating because you never know if it's going to be exactly the look you had in your head. I've had some hats that weren't

quite what I expected.” Stover, who now works in fashion, tried various milliners before settling on Melissa Jackson about four years ago. “At various functions I kept being attracted to hats that were obviously made by the same designer. I tracked her down and haven't looked back.”

“Katherine's one of my good, regular clients,” says Jackson, who trained in textile design and



**KATHERINE STOVER** has had a one-off hat made every year since 1992. Four years ago she discovered Melissa Jackson and is now a regular client of the Melbourne milliner. “I might say the most obscure thing and Melissa interprets it into something that's very of the moment.”



fashion at Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology and London's St Martin's School of Art. Her offbeat, sculptural creations are particular favourites with architects and designers. "Katherine often knows what she wants," says Jackson, "but also trusts that it's my area of expertise and is happy to go along with my suggestions." Adds Stroker: "I might say the most obscure thing, such as I want to look like Veruschka wearing safari gear in that famous old photo, and Melissa just gets it – she has enough fashion and historical knowledge to interpret it into something that's very of the moment."

Jackson's most unusual creation for Stroker, made in 2004, involves clear fishing-wire and coloured buttons. "Katherine's outfit was a Chanel-style jacket and skirt but in unusual, Christian Lacroix colours," the milliner explains. "I said, 'Let's have fun and be a bit more *Sex and the City*.' She rang me the night after the races and said she couldn't believe how many compliments she'd had. That's what I like to hear."

Once people start commissioning, they often go back time and again. Louise Pfanner has clients she's been working with for years, including entire families who use her as "their resident illustrator". As Pfanner explains: "One particular family has five adult children. Every time someone has a baby they put their money together and commission a picture."

Publicist Steven Godbee became aware of Pfanner's illustrations through her books (*Louise Builds a Boat* and *Little Lucie's Diary*) when he worked at the ABC a number of years ago. "I next came in contact with her when a dear friend commissioned an illustration to celebrate the birth of my daughter, Lucy. It's one of the most incredible things I've ever seen, so when close

friends have had babies I've commissioned illustrations from Louise for them. It's an interesting way of recording family history; I love the idea that she's creating an heirloom."

The first commission Godbee orchestrated was for musicians Katie Noonan and Isaac Hurren. It shows their son, Dexter, in a hammock on the beach with a ukulele, playing with Godbee's daughter Lucy "to connect their lives together".

The second is of a little girl named Poppy (the daughter of Godbee's friends) on a boat, her name spelt out in nautical flags. "That's something I first used in *Louise Builds a Boat*," says Pfanner. "I like spelling things out in a way that's not obvious." As is usually the case with Pfanner's commissions, it was done after a phone chat. She and Godbee have never met face to face.

Pfanner is a book illustrator by profession but enjoys doing commissioned illustrations "because they're immediate and give so much pleasure". They're not all for children either – a recent one, for a 50th birthday, is a family portrait in the centre of which is the dog, "who's far more important than the humans. When people tell me what they want in the pictures, I suspend judgment and absorb the information I'm given."

**Y**ou'd think professional musicians would know exactly what they want when it comes to ordering an instrument, but that's not the case, says classical guitar-maker Simon Marty. "Very few understand the mechanics of the instrument; all they know is they want a great guitar that's loud and easy to play. Their input is usually not terribly constructive – 99 per cent of them leave it up to me."

Karin Schaupp, a highly regarded soloist and member of guitar quartet Saffire, has owned six Simon Marty instruments over a 16-year period and agrees with him. "Things like volume, colour and nuance are there in all his guitars but the X-factor is very hard to articulate," she says.

Marty, who makes only classical guitars ("I'm a one-trick pony"), has a waiting list of just over a year from enthusiasts around the world and mainly communicates by email, finding out such details as whether clients would prefer a cedar or spruce-top instrument. Schaupp's latest, bought in 2002, is spruce. "I chose the spruce this time because it has a slightly brighter sound," the guitarist says. She opted for a smaller scale length "because I have extremely small hands. I also asked Simon to add an extra note, a high C, for a piece I was learning at the time." That piece is Barrios' *Un Sueño en la Floresta*, which is on her latest album, *Dreams*.

Schaupp is happy with her instrument but »





**DAVID ASHTON** commissioned artist Morna McLraith to paint portraits of his three children. "It's so nice to have a painting, rather than a photo, of your child hanging on the wall."

« "always thinking" about a new Simon Marty guitar. "It's exciting. The quality is consistent with Simon but there are subtle differences in the way the instrument responds, so it's a real process of discovery – like falling in love."

David Ashton, who runs a small software company, experienced a similar sense of discovery when he first saw Morna McLraith's atmospheric portraits of his children, Louise, George and Michael. He and his GP wife Rosemary were delighted. "Morna has a wonderful power of observation," Ashton says. "She brought out their special characteristics and also managed to reveal something in all the kids that I wasn't aware of at the time."

Ashton, whose father Richard ran the Julian Ashton Art School where McLraith had been a student, looked at the work of various artists before he settled on her. "It felt terrific to be commissioned, such a special compliment," says McLraith. Ashton didn't give her a brief nor specify the size of the paintings. "I'd seen her work before," he says. "I knew what she was capable of."

A finalist in last year's Portia Geach Memorial Award, McLraith says her commissions have included pets and, working from photographs, portraits of the dearly departed. She required several sittings of two or three hours each for the Ashtons' paintings. "The children sat still and were quiet, unlike most adults."

Ashton has a number of portraits of himself by his father "but these are better. The longer I have them, the more I like them. I don't think people realise how nice it is to have a painting, rather than a photo, of your child hanging on the wall."





## HOW TO COMMISSION YOUR OWN MASTERPIECE

- Do your homework; find the right person for you. Try not to be too fixed in your brief: you've chosen the expert so have confidence in their opinion. With hats and jewellery you can expect to see sketches and have fittings along the way.
- If you see a hat or piece of jewellery you like, ask the wearer who made it. Visit the maker's studio. Prices vary enormously: Melissa Jackson's hats start at \$375 and go up to \$1300 or more. For some milliners \$1300 may be the starting point.
- To commission music, contact one of the principal musical bodies such as Musica Viva or a state orchestra. For something more modest, get in touch with your favourite ensemble and see whether

they'd like you (with a group of friends, perhaps) to commission a piece. Your local conservatorium may also be able to help or you could try the New Music Network ([www.newmusicnetwork.com.au](http://www.newmusicnetwork.com.au)).

A 10-minute piece for a string quartet is likely to cost upwards of \$4000.

- Thinking of having a portrait painted? Visit as many galleries and exhibitions as possible, including student shows. Prices range from \$1000 to the tens of thousands, depending on the artist.

- Chances are you're not a beginner if you want to have an instrument made. Talk to other musicians and try out different instruments before you settle on a maker. A Simon Marty guitar costs about \$11,000.



**JULIAN BURNSIDE**, who has commissioned a dozen pieces of music over the past 10 years, most from emerging composers, says, "Artists have a hard time making a living." As for copyright, it remains with the composer.



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