

# AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY

A series that profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time



**Peter Sculthorpe**

1929 -  
Composer

This program is an episode of **Australian Biography** Series 7 produced under the National Interest Program of Film Australia. This well-established series profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time. Many have had a major impact on the nation's cultural, political and social life. All are remarkable and inspiring people who have reached a stage in their lives where they can look back and reflect. Through revealing in-depth interviews, they share their stories—of beginnings and challenges, landmarks and turning points. In so doing, they provide us with an invaluable archival record and a unique perspective on the roads we, as a country, have travelled.

**Australian Biography: Peter Sculthorpe**

**Director/Producer** Robin Hughes **Executive Producer** Megan McMurchy

**Duration** 26 minutes **Year** 1999

Study Guide prepared by Joy Sotheran © NFSA

Also in Series 7: Jim Cairns, Rosalie Gascoigne, Priscilla Kincaid-Smith,  
Charles Perkins, Bill Roycroft, Victor Smorgon

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## SYNOPSIS

In the 1950s and 1960s many Australian artists, writers and musicians established their homes and creative bases in Europe or America because the Australian cultural product was seen as inferior. However, Australia was the inspiration for composer Peter Sculthorpe, who chose to come back to live and work in the land of his birth. This decision by a man of such exceptional talent has had a profound effect on the history of music in this country.

From the 1950s, Sculthorpe has presented Australia both to itself and to the rest of the world through music. His music traces the landscape, representing its contours, beauty and harshness. From 'Sun Music' to 'Kakadu' his work has evoked Australia. His distinctive style has been influenced by Aboriginal and Asian musics, which have added another layer to his work and brought him international acclaim.

In this interview Peter Sculthorpe describes the way in which Australian history and landscape have shaped his approach and tells of the emotionally significant events in his life which have found expression in his music. He also explains, with warmth and eloquence, the nature of his endless journey to create the perfect work of art—a journey which continues to motivate his work today.

## CURRICULUM LINKS

**Australian Biography: Peter Sculthorpe** will have interest and relevance for students from middle to senior secondary and tertiary levels. Curriculum links include SOSE/HSIE, History, Drama, Music, English, Media Studies, Visual Arts and career education.

## PETER SCULTHORPE

Professor Peter Sculthorpe is a distinguished Australian composer whose work is performed around the world. He was born in Launceston, Tasmania in 1929 and educated at Launceston Church Grammar School, the University of Melbourne and Oxford University. He was composer-in-residence at Yale University while visiting the United States as a Harkness Fellow in 1966-67, and Visiting Professor at the University of Sussex in 1972-73. Appointed Reader in Music at the University of Sydney in the late 60s and then Professor in Musical Composition, he is now Professor Emeritus at that university.

Recently Peter Sculthorpe has been lecturing at Toronto, London (Ontario) and Michigan State universities. He is also writing music for events such as the Cheltenham Music Festival in the UK and the Darwin Guitar Festival.

In 2002 he became the only living Australian to be elected a life member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. The only other Australians elected to the academy were poet AD Hope, visual artist Sidney Nolan and writer Christina Stead.

## REQUIRED LEARNING RESOURCES

- A copy of Film Australia's Australian Biography: Peter Sculthorpe
- Accompanying notes for teaching and learning

## RECOMMENDED LEARNING RESOURCES

- Many documentaries can be used to compare directorial approaches. An excellent comparative documentary is **The Edge of the World**, also part of Film Australia's National Interest Program. This film gives a unique insight into the intriguing work of Tim Winton, one of Australia's finest authors and is also accompanied by teachers' notes.

The Film Australia website [www.nfsa.gov.au](http://www.nfsa.gov.au) provides a list of documentaries on a range of arts practitioners and enterprises, many of which have accompanying resources for teaching and learning.

- The Australian Music Centre website [www.amcoz.com.au/home.htm](http://www.amcoz.com.au/home.htm) provides extensive assistance with composer biographies, lists of scores, discographies and a rich store of further resources for including Australian music in the classroom.
- Two prominent Australian cultural historians/commentators are:
  - Geoffrey Serle (1922-1998), whose cultural history writings include **The Creative Spirit in Australia: A Cultural History**.
  - Humphrey McQueen, who is a historian, arts and social critic and author of more than a dozen books on history, politics and the visual arts. His books include **A New Britannia, Social Sketches of Australia, The Black Swan of Trespass, Gone Tomorrow** and other writings on Australian history, art and intellectual life.

## SOSE/HSIE, HISTORY, SOCIAL STUDIES

### Discussion points

- Peter Sculthorpe's father offered to give him a car if he would stay at home rather than go to university in Melbourne. Peter said, 'Dad, I love cars, but a car is only a car and music is my life'. What does this response tell us about the young Peter Sculthorpe?
- Many Australian painters claim to be influenced by the landscape. How can musical composition be influenced by the landscape?
- It is often argued that through to the mid 20th century non-Indigenous Australians assumed that Australia's 'identity' and 'culture' were located in Europe. Is this true? Discuss the case for and against this argument.
- Peter Sculthorpe relates that when he returned from Oxford the Director of Music of the ABC was 'aghast' at the idea of playing his music. Why did the music director say, 'You're Australian—why should we perform your music?' What clues does this give us about the cultural climate in Australia at that time?
- How, and to what extent, has Australian identity changed since the 1950s? What were some of the influences for change?
- How has Australia's attitude to the landscape evolved since the establishment of the colonies?

In the opening scene of the program, Peter Sculthorpe says that his ambition is to create the perfect work of art. He adds, 'perhaps the history of the human race can be told through the story of people wanting to create the perfect work of art rather than through wars and pestilences'.

- What is a perfect work of art?
- To what extent can you agree with the view that history might be told through the perspective of people striving to create the perfect work of art?
- What are some other perspectives through which history may be told?
- How might history be told from the perspective of Indigenous Australians?

## Activities

- Peter Sculthorpe was born in 1929 and grew up during the 1930s and 40s. Research and write about some of the major events in Australia and the rest of the world during his lifetime.
- Identify some significant technical changes that have occurred during the lifetime of Peter Sculthorpe and write about how you think these may have affected his life and his work as a composer.
- What technological changes have affected your own life and how do you envisage your life in your seventies?
- Choose a year in Australian history and identify four different 'perspectives'. Write a paragraph on the history of that year from each of those perspectives.
- Choose two separate non-consecutive decades of Australian history. Prepare and present to the class a talk comparing the work of prominent writers, visual artists and/or composers in each of those decades. You may choose one or more examples. What are the factors that influenced their work and what does their work tell us about Australia at that time?
- Debate the following statement: Australians have developed a closer relationship with the landscape since 1950.

## DRAMA

### Discussion points

- Consider one or more plays that you are familiar with and discuss the role of music in those plays.
- What are 'rites of passage'? Do they apply only to individual lives?
- The Sydney Opera House opened in 1973, and in 1974 Peter Sculthorpe's opera 'Rites of Passage' was performed there. The work, which is said to reflect the Australian landscape, is one of the most controversial pieces in the history of Australian music. Why do you think Sculthorpe would choose such a title for this very large work and why were people so intensely for or against it?
- Choose a film and imagine it without music in the background. Then discuss the contribution music makes to four or five key scenes.
- In what way, if any, is concern with the Australian landscape evident in the work of Australian playwrights?

## Activities

- In groups, plan and act out a play based on the scene where Peter Sculthorpe asks the ABC Music Director to broadcast his music. You may expand the scene to include a panel discussion between a group of musicians and ABC executives. You may also add music to your piece.
- The Belvoir Street Theatre produced a play based on the Patrick White novel, **The Aunt's Story**. Peter Sculthorpe's music was used in the play. Research the plot of **The Aunt's Story** and explain why you think Peter Sculthorpe's music was chosen to advance the play's dramatic concepts.
- Identify and locate the script of an Australian play with which you are familiar. Design a soundtrack for the play using Australian music that you consider appropriate to advance the dramatic concepts. You may choose Australian music of any kind.
- In groups, plan and improvise a dramatic piece based on different rites of passage. Choose suitable music, rather than words, for the crucial moments of transformation.

## MUSIC

In a lecture given in May 2002 entitled 'Landscape, Spirituality and Music: An Australian Story', Ann Boyd, Professor of Music at Sydney University and former student of Peter Sculthorpe, told the audience that the main language of Australia was 'earth language'—a feeling for and bonding with nature. She asserted that Australians are, 'in spite of themselves', being unconsciously 'Aboriginalised'. 'In Australia, where landscape and Aboriginality are fused, music has a central role in creating and Aboriginalising our identity', she said.

Professor Boyd played a sample of her own work and compositions by Peter Sculthorpe, Ross Edwards, David Lumsdaine and Aboriginal songman Tommy Barandjak, using them to illustrate the way Australian composers have broken from European tradition and developed a distinctive style of music drawn from Aboriginal and Asian influences.

### Discussion points

- To what extent do you think Australian composers are reflecting a break from European tradition and what role has Peter Sculthorpe played?
- How important is it for internationally acclaimed artists such as the renowned Australian conductor Simone Young to be encouraged to continue to make Australia their base? What is the value of international experience to the development of their careers?
- How can music 'reflect the landscape'?
- What is Australian music? Is it different from other music?
- What is a perfect work of art?

## Activities

- Use examples of contemporary Australian music compositions to debate the following statement: 'Australian composers have broken from European tradition and developed a distinctive style of music drawn from Aboriginal and Asian influences'.
- Research nationalism in music and use musical examples to demonstrate some features of this type of music.
- Nationalism in music is usually considered a characteristic of the 'romantic' period. Do Australian composers as a whole, or do 'groups' of Australian composers, reflect this kind of nationalism? Using one or more examples of each, compare the treatment of musical elements in romantic nationalist works of a 19th century European composer with those of a contemporary Australian composer.
- It was suggested to Peter Sculthorpe that he write a piece for the Sydney Symphony Orchestra without rhythm, melody or harmony. He thought it was not really possible, however he set out to do it and it became 'Sun Music', one of his best known works. Compose a piece around a theme of your choice 'without rhythm, melody or harmony' and prepare a presentation explaining how the elements such as pitch, duration, timbre and dynamics are used or not used to achieve the musical concept.
- Perform the above piece.

## ENGLISH AND MEDIA STUDIES

### Discussion points

- The Australian landscape is an avowed inspiration for the music of Peter Sculthorpe. To what extent, if any, is this preoccupation reflected in the work of Australian writers?
- What figures in Australian literature have had an influence on Australian writing that is comparable to that of Peter Sculthorpe in music?
- How has the interviewer in this program framed our view of Peter Sculthorpe?
- What is a perfect work of art?
- Australian writer Tim Winton was recently shortlisted for the prestigious international Booker Prize for his novel **Dirt Music**. In an interview he said, 'I'm relentlessly provincial'. What do you think he means by this? Do you think that Peter Sculthorpe is provincial?

### Activities

- Investigate Australian writers who are contemporaries of Peter Sculthorpe: those who were born around the late 1920s and early 1930s. With reference to the work of one or two, use examples of their work to identify and demonstrate preoccupations or recurrent themes.
- Peter Sculthorpe is the only living Australian elected to be a life member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Other Australians honoured with membership of the American Academy of Arts and Letters were Christina Stead and AD Hope. Research and write a short article on the life and work of each of these writers. Your writing may be in the form of an obituary.
- Find out about the Booker Prize. Write a short news story on each Australian writer who has won the Booker Prize and the novel that was awarded.
- Give a presentation on the extent to which current Australian writers express Australian identity in their work. Demonstrate your points with short excerpts from works, in any genre, of one or two writers.
- Choose an Australian writer who you think is concerned with landscape. Write about how landscape is reflected in their work. Also include a single paragraph biography of the writer.
- Choose an Australian who you find interesting. You may invent an imaginary figure or choose someone you admire, whether famous or not. Plan the questions you would ask if you were preparing a program about that person.
- Debate the following statement: Australian writing is like any other writing.

## VISUAL ARTS

### Discussion points

- To what extent is nationalism a part of Australian visual arts?
- To what extent is the work of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian artists influenced by Indigenous art? The video **Two Thirds Sky-Artists in Desert Country**, available through Film Australia, could be a useful resource.
- What is a perfect work of art?
- Is Australian visual art different from any other?

### Activities

- To what extent is landscape a feature of Australian art and how has the treatment of landscape changed from colonial establishment to the present? Collect examples to support your findings and give a presentation to the class. (This may be done in groups with each group electing to cover a different period of time, or a different style or school of work.)
- Peter Sculthorpe is the only living Australian elected to be a life member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Another Australian honoured with membership of the American Academy of Arts and Letters was Sidney Nolan. Using examples of his work, write about why Sidney Nolan was the only Australian painter to gain membership.
- Listen to Peter Sculthorpe's 'Sun Music' and design a cover for the compact disc. Realise your design using electronic or other media.

## RESOURCES

### Online

Peter Sculthorpe: Discography  
<http://www.fabermusic.com/composers/peter-sculthorpe/discography>

### Listed in this guide

- Geoffrey Bennett (director), **The Edge of the World**. Film Australia, 55 min, 1997© NFSA
- Humphrey McQueen, **The Black Swan of Trespass: The Emergence of Modernist Painting in Australia to 1944**. Alternative Publishing, Sydney, 1979
- Humphrey McQueen, **Gone Tomorrow: Australia in the 80s**. Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1982
- Humphrey McQueen, **A New Britannia: An Argument Concerning the Social Origins of Australian Radicalism and Nationalism**. Penguin, Melbourne, revised edition, 1986
- Humphrey McQueen, **Social Sketches of Australia**. Penguin, Ringwood, Victoria, 2nd edition, 1991
- Sean O'Brien (director), **Two Thirds Sky-Artists in Desert Country**. Arcadia Productions, Sydney, 52 min, 2002
- Geoffrey Serle, **The Creative Spirit in Australia: A Cultural History**. Heinemann, Melbourne, revised edition, 1987 (Originally published under the title **From Deserts the Prophets Come: The Creative Spirit in Australia 1788-1972**, Heinemann, Melbourne, 1974)
- Tim Winton, **Dirt Music**. Picador, Pan Macmillan Australia, Sydney, 2002

### Further reading

- Michael Hannan, **Peter Sculthorpe: His Music and Ideas 1929-1979**. University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1982
- Deborah Hayes, **Peter Sculthorpe: A Bio-Bibliography**. Bio-Bibliographies in Music No. 50. Greenwood Press, Westport, Connecticut, 1993

