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Wendy Sharpe brings some rage to Unashamedly Original

by [Angus McPherson](#) on July 19, 2017 (2 days ago) filed under [Classical Music](#) | [Chamber](#) | [Visual Art](#) | [Comment Now](#)

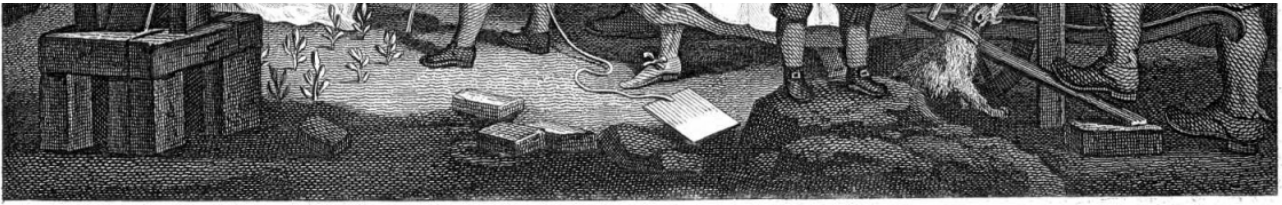


The award-winning artist will recreate Hogarth's *The Enraged Musician* to the sounds of the Australian Art Quartet.

"We have a man trying to play what looks like a violin, with his hands clasped over his ears in despair because outside there are all these people on the streets, screaming baby, barking dog and he just can't concentrate because of the racket," artist Wendy Sharpe tells me over the phone, describing the scene depicted in William Hogarth's engraving *The Enraged Musician*. But while the streetscapes of Sydney in 2017 look a little different to London in 1741, when Hogarth created his famous artwork, there are plenty of parallels that can be drawn.

"It's about a crazy, noisy city, and there is a musician trying to practise, trying to compose, trying to have some time to think about what he's doing, and being interrupted by all the noises around him," she says. "As I'm talking to you I've got the neighbours getting some work done to their house, some kind of machine whirring now. Obviously as a musician that really is annoying. If I'm painting, I can just turn the music on or the radio on or something on, and get away from it, but obviously as a musician you do not want that noise."





William Hogarth's *The Enraged Musician* 1741

Hogarth's engraving is at the heart of *The Enraged Musicians*, which will take place at Sydney's City Recital Hall as part of the two-day Unashamedly Original festival this weekend. Sharpe – who has won both the Sulman and Archibald Prizes – will be recreating Hogarth's engraving live on stage, accompanied by the Australian Art Quartet, who will be playing music by Handel, Pärt and Shostakovich.

"I'm coming up with a plan," she tells me. "These characters in the original Hogarth engraving are mostly people selling things and busking. They're people on the street."

Sharpe hopes to translate some of these activities into a modern version, set in contemporary Sydney. "For example, there's someone sharpening a knife with this noisy machine," she says. "They're spinning something and it would have made a horrible scraping sound. He's leaning over and doing that – I've got someone digging up the road with a drill in the same sort of pose."





Artist Wendy Sharpe. Photo © Michael Amendolia

Creating her artwork live in front of an audience – over a set period of time – poses different challenges to Sharpe's regular studio practice. "The time restriction is something that as an artist I don't have," she says. "I don't even know how long it takes me to do something normally – I do it, I put it aside, come back to it, do another version, try another way."

She won't have that luxury with the audience looking on. "I don't even have the luxury of having a cup of coffee and coming back," she says, "I'll be looking at my watch and I'll know that even if I might want to end up doing something with more detail I might have to just let it go."

Sharpe has met with the constraints of performative art-making before. In August last year she took part in a similarly collaborative event at Sydney's The Yellow House, drawing composer and *Limelight* publisher **Andrew Batt-Rawden nude**, also accompanied by the Australian Art Quartet. In that situation, Sharpe had about 25 minutes to capture each pose. "I did four poses, and they were much bigger," she says. "If it was a bit wrong, and I didn't have time to redraw it, I just had to let it go."

"I guess as a musician each time you play there are differences," she says. "There are bits that you feel more pleased with, bits where you've missed it a little bit. I suppose that that's something, as any kind of performer, you have to get used to. Whereas as an artist, you don't, normally."

"But this is unique – this isn't someone posing for me," she says of *The Enraged Musicians*. "I have to realise a complex picture in a short amount of time, and that's it. And not only is that it, it's also in front of a huge audience and projected 60 metres on a screen, which is pretty full-on really. I have to have an idea of what I'm doing – I don't need to know completely, and I certainly will change things that I've already planned, or muck around with whatever design I've come up with in the performance – but I need to have some idea or otherwise there's no way I can do it."





Wendy Sharpe. Photo © Martin Lane

In many ways Sharpe's preparation for the concert performance, learning and memorising details of the painting she will recreate live, mirrors the way musicians prepare. "As a musician you've got the music in front of you and you're reading the music – but you also have played it enough to feel that you know it and understand it," she says. "I need to have understood the type of thing I want to do with this, and worked it out to a degree, and then I can improvise."

"Once I've got something that's pretty close to what I want to do, then I will be able to take that and kind of ad lib – so I won't be copying what I've designed, but I will be able to know more what I'm doing, otherwise it would be just too hard to do in one hour."

Will the presence of the music effect the visual art? Definitely, she tells me. "If I'm listening to music, or if I'm listening to text (because I like listening to stories when I paint), I always feel that – even though no one can see it – some of what I'm listening to is going into what I'm doing."

"Standing on the stage next to four incredible musicians, there's no way that that wouldn't happen," she says. "I know that during more soulful bits, there will be more soulful bits of drawing, and if there is more percussive bits, I'm certain that that will mean more little dots."

And for Sharpe this intermingling of art forms is something special – something that needs to be embraced more. "I think it's incredibly exciting because you have to work in a different way," she says. "People think, 'well the music is so wonderful we don't want anything visual to distract you from it' or 'the dancing is so wonderful we don't want to have an interesting set' – what a load of crap! Why should everything be stripped down to one really great component and everything else subordinate? You should be able to have an overwhelming experience of wonderful and fascinating things."

The Enraged Musicians is at City Recital Hall, Sydney, July 23 as part of the Unashamedly Original festival.

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