

'When Music Plays'

5th October 2025, 4pm

The Church

Mara Kiek (vocal and percussion)

Llew Kiek (guitar and bouzouki)

Sandy Evans (soprano and tenor saxophones)

Paul Cutlan (composer, clarinets, alto flute)

Lloyd Swanton double bass

Liisa Pallandi violin

Riikka Sintonen violin

Beth Condon viola

Oliver Miller cello

Hearing poetry in an unfamiliar language can present barriers, or it can open up new ways to hear human expression. The metre and intonation of each language carries its own emotional affect in its tone and rhythm, before we even consider its intended meaning. Once we delve into the potential translations (and there can often be more than one), we can encounter unexpected perspectives on

familiar human themes. While a translation may be an imperfect rendering of the original idea, it can still offer a window to a different way to express the human condition. Once an unfamiliar language is set to music, the abstraction of that language's sounds *become* part of the music, unmediated by the barrier of specificity.

Mara Kiek has made a career from singing songs in ancient and modern languages of the Balkans, Western Europe, Türkiye and Persia. Kiek's expressive and compelling voice evolved in tandem with the discovery and inspiration offered by the many cross-cultural connections and collaborations in her career. For over 40 years, Kiek's ARIA winning band MARA! has been a platform for presenting music of many cultures—particularly those of the Balkans—layered with its members' international credentials in the worlds of jazz, classical, improvised and original music.

In selecting poetry for her to sing in this current song-cycle, I consulted closely with Kiek, casting the linguistic net wide, to eventually select five poems: one Australian, two Serbian and two Greek. These have been arranged to form a loose narrative, starting with the ephemeral nature of love, progressing

through themes of passion, fallibility, remembrance, and reflection. Translations have been reproduced below.

I am very fortunate to have secured the artistry of my dear friends in the MARA! band, along with a wonderful string quartet, led by Liisa Pallandi, to realise these songs. MARA! has built its performance practice over more than forty years, hybridising a myriad of stylistic influences, including jazz, Balkan folk, aspects of rock and art music. As a member since 1997, it has been my privilege to make this hybridity and collaboration the focus of my PhD study. The song cycle we are performing is the final part of my creative practice portfolio.

In addition to the performers, I thank the following people and organisations for their invaluable help in making this performance project possible:

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Professor Peter Radan, Dr Dragan Bakic, and Anna Rutkowska, outreach librarian at UNSW, for their assistance in locating the relevant custodians of Vasko Popa's and Desanka Maksimović's copyright; Svetlana Šeatović, The Desanka Maksimović Foundation and Maksimović family, and the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts for graciously granting permission for me to make musical settings of Maksimović's and Popa's incredible poetry; Gary Dawson, for introducing me to his passionately helpful friends in the Serbian community; Guy Dickerson for his audio engineering skills; Nena Beretin for her wonderful care and hospitality at The Church; My supervisors: Associate Professor John Napier and Dr Alister Spence.

The premier performance of 'When Music Plays' is dedicated to the memory of Danny Thompson—a towering voice on the double bass, devoted friend of the Kieks and mentor to MARA!

Paul Cutlan 24 September 2025

The poems

1. Love's Calling John Shaw Neilson (1872 -1942)

QUIETLY as rosebuds
Talk to thin air,
Love came so lightly
I knew not he was there.

Quietly as lovers
Creep at the middle noon,
Softly as players tremble
In the tears of a tune;

Quietly as lilies
Their faint vows declare,
Came the shy pilgrim:
I knew not he was there.

Quietly as tears fall
On a warm sin,
Softly as griefs call
In a violin;

Without hail or tempest,

Blue sword or flame,
Love came so lightly
I knew not that he came.

2. Opomena (Warning)

Desanka Maksimović (1898 - 1993)

Listen, I will tell you my secret:
never leave me alone
when someone is playing music.

I might begin to imagine
deep and gentle
eyes of someone
quite ordinary.

I might imagine
that I'm sinking into sound,
and I might offer
my hands to anyone.

It might seem to me
so lovely and easy
to love
just for a day.

Or I might tell someone, in that
moment of magical light,
my dearest secret
how much I love you.

Oh, never leave me alone
when someone is playing music.
It might seem to me that, somewhere in the woods,
all my tears are flowing again
from some wild forest spring.

It might seem to me that a black butterfly
is painting on heavy water with its wing
what once no one dared to say.

It might seem to me that, somewhere in the dark,
someone is singing, and with a bitter flower
touching the wound of a bleeding heart.

Oh, never leave me alone
Never alone
when someone is playing music. *(translation by
Milka Ilijasevich)*

3. Ohola Greška (Conceited Mistake)

Vasko Popa (1922 -1991)

Once upon a time there was a mistake
So silly so small
That no one would even have noticed it

It couldn't bear
To see itself to hear of itself

It invented all manner of things
Just to prove
that it didn't really exist

It invented space
To put its proofs in
And time to keep its proofs
And the world to see its proofs

All it invented
Was not so silly
Nor so small
But was of course mistaken

Could it have been otherwise (*Trans. Anne Pennington*)

4. Fonés (Voices) C. P. Cavafy (1863 - 1933)

Voices idealised and beloved
of those who have died or of those
who, like the dead, they have been lost to us.

Sometimes they speak to us in our dreams;
Sometimes, in our thoughts, the mind hears them.

And with their sound they momentarily return
sounds from the early poetry of our life—
like music in the night, distant, disappearing.

(trans. Kostas Wootis)

5 THALASSA TOU PROIOU (Morning Sea)

C. P. Cavafy

Let me stop here; and let me look at nature for
awhile.

The morning sea's and cloudless sky's
brilliant blue, and yellow shore: all
beautiful and grand, bathed in light.

Let me stop here; and let me fool myself that I do see
all these

(I really saw them for a moment when I stopped);
not, even here, my fantasies,
my memories, images of delight. (*trans. Kostas*
Wootis)