

The Australian



Andrew Ford's novel inspiration

- Rosemary Sorensen
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ARTISTS, whatever their art form, always yearn to be someone else, composer Andrew Ford suggests. "I envy poets, and probably would like to be a poet," Ford says, "but I think that's most common with artists, they would rather be something else in the arts."

Ford is musing about why so many of his musical compositions have been inspired by other artworks, poems in particular. Most recently, he was commissioned to write a short piece to be performed by the West Australian Symphony Orchestra as part of a water music-themed concert.

The brief was specific: it needed to be about water, written for a baritone (Teddy Tahu Rhodes), and the words had to be written by a West Australian.

Fortunately, Ford had been reading Tim Winton's *Breath*. The choice seemed obvious, but when he started rereading the novel, he realised that most of the descriptions of water were about surfing. "I couldn't keep a straight face and write a piece to do with surfing," Ford says, "all that stuff about crashing through the waves, and to do something as dramatic as surfing was going to be too much anyway."

But then he came across the short, lyrical description, embedded within Winton's Miles Franklin award-winning book, of a boy dreaming about drowning, and he knew he had his starting point.

"It is like a hermetically detached part of the novel, like stumbling across a poem in the middle of the story," Ford says. "There is in the writing a sense of slow motion, and I wanted to capture that in the music."

Winton's novel was published in 2008 and may prove, of all the writer's award-winning books, to be his most influential (although *Cloudstreet*, with its successful stage adaptation, will take some beating). Ford's use of a small excerpt from *Breath* coincides with an exhibition of paintings by Andrew McIlroy at Axia Modern Art gallery in Melbourne, also inspired by that same description.

Against the Tide includes paintings inspired by *Breath*, "hinting at the promise of resurfacing to the familiar sounds of summer vacation and youthful exuberance", says McIlroy.

"The boys of Winton's novel push each other to the edges of endurance, courage and sanity. For me, this is the stuff of existence - exploring the elements of innocence and experience, adventure and self-destruction, exhilaration and fear."

McIlroy's paintings are deep-blue and disturbing, a sub-aqueous plunge that captures the terrible beauty of Winton's near-drowning dream described in *Breath*: "White streaks of turbulence drove down like tracer fire and rocket trails, a free-fire zone in dim and shuddering green."

Ford has set this text for strings, using a vibraphone, harmonium, celeste and harp at the opening and closing, then two violins playing the body of the work, the harmonium coming in to create "long cloudy sounds" along the way.

Musical word setting was the subject of his doctoral thesis when he first came to Australia from Britain in the 1980s to teach at the University of Wollongong, and Ford says his goal is to be sure the words are clear.

"I do a lot of word setting, and it's usually because I've come across a poem or a set of poems I really like," he says. "In my culturally imperialist way, I want other people to like them too, so I set them to music to have them sung. That's part of the impulse behind it."

The words are "like little pegs", he says, "which in a way tell you what to write".

The West Australian Symphony Orchestra will play A Dream of Drowning, conducted by Paul Daniel, on a program that will include Debussy's La Mer and Vaughan Williams's A Sea Symphony, on March 12 and 13 at Perth Concert Hall.

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