

FIONA BURNETT: A DISTINCTIVE SOPRANO VOICE

by Gerry Koster*

[This article appeared in the Feb/Mar 2000 edition of JazzChord.]



Fiona Burnett: It was just something about the range of the soprano saxophone, and something about its timbre that got her... PHOTO CREDIT JOE GLAYSHER

Since her first adventures in music Fiona Burnett has developed an impressive CV and now, at 28, is establishing herself as a distinctive and leading voice on her instrument in the Australian jazz world. The last decade has been a period of intense study. Originally from Sydney, Fiona studied at the Canberra School of Music before moving to Melbourne in 1992 to study at the Victorian College of the Arts. In 1997 she completed a Masters of Music Performance degree at the VCA, obtaining First Class Honours in performance.

During this time she was able to broaden her musical education by studying with leading contemporary composer Mary Finsterer and classical saxophonist Graeme Shilton. Fiona also completed a Diploma of Education at Latrobe University.

In 1992 Fiona founded the contemporary jazz ensemble Morgana, comprised of five women performing original repertoire. This ensemble has been recognized as a leading force in Australian improvised music. She has performed extensively with Morgana which has appeared at the major Australian festivals.

* When this interview took place in 2000, Gerry Koster was Jazz Co-ordinator at 3PBS-FM in Melbourne and presenter of the program "Dizzy Atmosphere" on Sunday afternoons, from 1-3 pm.

In May 1996 Morgana was granted funding from Playing Australia and completed a successful national tour. During that year Fiona also received her first opportunity to perform internationally, travelling to Asia to perform with the multi-national, all-women ensemble Inside Out led by the double bassist Belinda Moody. This ensemble performed at both the Thailand International Jazz Festival and Jak Jazz, Indonesia's international jazz festival.

More recently she established the Fiona Burnett Quartet, an ensemble that performs original material and modern jazz standards. The quartet features a powerful rhythm section that includes pianist Mark Fitzgibbon.



Pianist Mark Fitzgibbon: part of the powerful rhythm section of the Fiona Burnett Quartet... PHOTO CREDIT JOE GLAYSHER

Gerry Koster: Fiona, what was your first major musical experience that made you to take the first steps down a musical path and choose music as a career? Any one moment?

Fiona Burnett: I don't know if there was any one specific moment that ever actually made me feel like I'd made a choice, it was almost as if the choice had bestowed itself upon me. There were moments when I thought 'yes I am going to be a musician'.., and I've always listened to music all the time, all throughout my childhood. I really didn't formally start studying music until I was 11. I dabbled a bit... I mucked around with a lot of instruments, then I started playing saxophone at 13.

GK: Why the sax?

FB: I was absolutely just drawn to the sound of it. I thought it had the most incredible sound, and I guess at the time I couldn't really articulate it other than saying 'I want to play that'.

GK: Was it a soprano?

FB: It was an alto actually, it's quite common for young people to first go for that horn. Yeah, I think it was very much an instinctive decision, not something that I thought about logically or in an analytical sense; it was more something of a desire. I was very restless as a child and my energy was something I didn't know what to do with. Once I started studying music, that's where the energy went, that's where it was channelled.

GK: When did the soprano come into it?

FB: I got my first soprano nine years ago, when I was 19, and that's when I really felt that I finally got the instrument that I wanted to play. The first soprano I had I bought from someone for \$500. It was a beautiful old horn, a King. Up until then I was playing alto, but I was struggling with the alto a bit and then when I got the soprano - other than all the inherent problems that come with playing the soprano - I suddenly thought that it was a lot easier to play, and I really liked the sound of it. It was just something about the range of the soprano, and something about its timbre that just got me.

GK: Many jazz musicians have a “hero” — someone who inspires them, or there is someone they listen to a lot and perhaps try to emulate in the beginning. Who would you cite as being your first inspiration?



John Coltrane: he expresses so much in terms of what anyone is trying to express through improvised music... PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST

FB: I guess the two main people that pop up in my mind are firstly Coltrane and secondly [Dave] Liebman. From the time when I first got my soprano, they were the two players that I really listened to a lot, and then I also listened to Steve Lacy a fair bit - early Steve Lacy. I guess that the eternal searching of Coltrane's musical journey, his musical evolution and the way in which he developed his style very publicly, is something that so many musicians are drawn to. Those two people have been very influential on my style and I guess fundamentally Coltrane is the main one, even though I don't like to think that I'm a clone - and I would never want to clone somebody because I want to express myself. But Coltrane expresses so much in terms of music and in terms of what anyone is trying to express through improvised music,

which I guess is the essence of humanity. So he's a monumental figure in my influences.

GK: How did the quartet come into being?

FB: The quartet was something that I wanted to put together for some time. I probably really thought about it for at least 12 months before it happened. I wanted to have a musical situation in which I could stretch out as a soloist more and play in what I thought was a traditional way - a horn player and a rhythm section interacting in very much a modern jazz, hard-bop setting. I remember having a discussion with a really good friend of mine, Carola Grey [German drummer] in a hotel in Jakarta about putting my quartet together and she just said to me, "You just have to do this, you have to put your quartet together." She put it so clearly, so matter of fact, it just seemed like the obvious thing to do. That was at a time when I'd just been working with Belinda Moody, in a multi-national ensemble at some festivals in Asia. Meeting Carola was meeting a young woman who was out there in the world leading bands, playing gigs, organizing stuff across Europe and New York and was really out there doing it. And she really, really inspired and encouraged me to go for it myself. So it [the quartet] really came about towards the end of my Master's degree. That was a very intense experience in itself. At that time I needed to put ensembles together for my final recital. I had a chamber trio with cello and orchestral percussion and I did a performance with a classical pianist as well, playing a concerto for soprano saxophone ... Then I needed an ensemble in an improvisational setting; that's when I put the musicians together for the quartet, which then went on to record for *Jim McLeod's Jazztrack*.



German drummer Carola Grey: you just have to do this, you have to put your quartet together...

GK: Getting on to that soprano again, I know that you've called it a beast. It has a reputation as a notoriously difficult instrument to learn to play. Not too many musicians choose to specialize on it, but those that do, develop their own, individual sound.

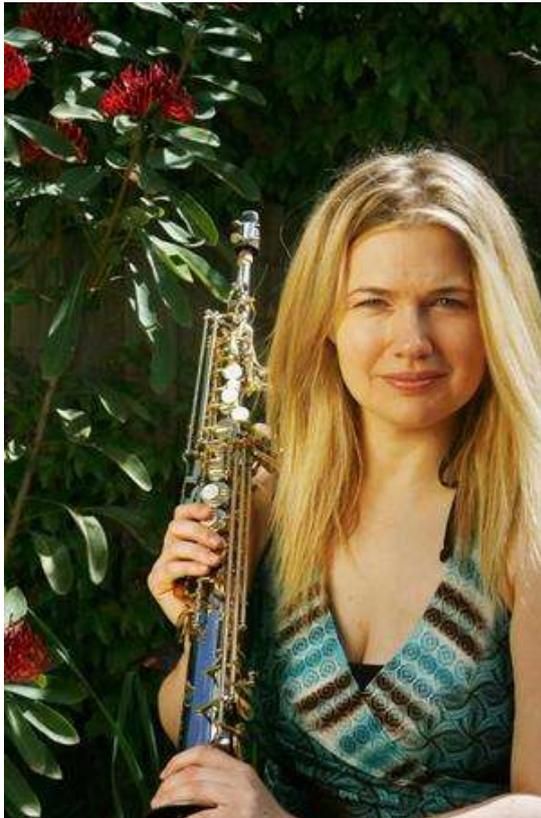
FB: I think the soprano is quite unique; the soprano is the kind of instrument that just sounds *intense!* - the soprano more than maybe a lot of other instruments. A lot of people say that the saxophone is the instrument that emulates the human voice most closely. I have to say that I probably agree with that, and it is different to the other saxophones, and I think that it's not just because of the physical characteristics of the instrument. It's also the history of who's played the instrument and how long that they've played it, and how entrenched that is within the jazz tradition. I think that if you take a tenor to a gig you're taking a lot of history with you to that gig. You're taking so many great, great innovators in the jazz style... you've got all that 'jazz baggage' to take with you. I find the thought of that quite overwhelming, similarly with the alto. With soprano it seems like you do get a lot of individualistic players coming along, but there seem to be fewer players who focus on soprano, so there's a bit more space, there's a bit more room to move and a bit more room for your own personal interpretation of the instrument. It is incredibly challenging and if you do want to play it well, it takes up all your time. It's totally consuming. While I still play the tenor occasionally, I prefer to focus on the soprano, and sure, that means that I don't do so much 'work' type playing, but it forces me into a more creative head space; it forces me to really think about my voice. If I was dividing my time between the other horns, I don't personally feel like I'd be able to get that same kind of intensity of the relationship between myself and my instrument.



There seem to be fewer players who focus on soprano, so there's a bit more space...
PHOTO CREDIT PONCH HAWKES

GK: In 1998 you travelled to Quebec, Canada where you took up an invitation to attend a young composers' symposium at Le Domaine Forget Music and Dance Academy.

FB: The Academy was located in the Canadian hinterland and I joined nine other musicians from across the USA and Canada, all of whom were composers. I was the only performer among them. What was amazing about that summer school was that it was in this incredibly serene environment, completely isolated, cut off from the world, on the top of a hill looking over this incredible lake that I couldn't see the other side of - and it was completely dedicated to furthering your art. I was glad to be there as a player, but to be there also as a composer, I was way out of my safety net, and I was with these nine other young people from across North America, who were composers. We talked about abstract concepts all week, pretty difficult things to grasp. So in terms of what I got from that I think it's just that immersion in discussing composition as something that is completely legitimate – but in very abstract ways - but actually starting to get a handle on that.



Burnett in Canada: talking about abstract concepts all week, pretty difficult things to grasp...

GK: Composition has played a fairly big role in your musical career. Your experience in Canada, working with composers and also within a classical vein, has that steered you in the direction you're going now? Have you always had an interest in doing something with a string quartet?

FB: Well I always wanted to do something with a string quartet. I guess I had this notion in my mind that all 'serious' composers write for string quartet. So last year I decided that I would write my first string quartet (laughs). So I wrote this three movement piece called *Isle of the Dead*, actually after *Isle of the Dead* in Port Arthur, Tasmania. That was performed early last year. Through that, the ideas grew for the

project that I've just completed. Something I've always done was write - it seems such a natural thing to do, for me to express myself through composition and through performing my own music. I actually think that I wouldn't be being honest to myself if I wasn't doing that. So I'm really drawn to expressing myself in a context which I have created myself. The composer in me is becoming louder and louder and standing up more and forcing me to take notice of it. The composer in me is starting to hit me over the head and say 'hey! you've got to write this down', not letting me go. The last piece that I wrote, the composition had me by the scruff of the neck, it wouldn't even let me go and get a carton of milk, it was just full on. It wouldn't let me eat, I had to write it (laughs)!



Soaring at Dawn's rhythm section included percussionist David Jones (above) and bassist Ben Robertson (below)... ROBERTSON PHOTO CREDIT ROGER MITCHELL



GK: In December, 1999, you premiered your composition *Soaring at Dawn*, a suite of six movements for soprano saxophone, string quartet, double bass and percussion, at the Melbourne Women's Jazz Festival. You were the featured soloist on soprano sax, with the Silo String Quartet, bassist Ben Robertson and percussionist David Jones.

FB: The title comes from an image from a card my mother sent me, which was a gorgeous image of a flock of cockatoos taking off at dawn and it's called *Soaring at Dawn*. I was like 'wow! What a great image!' I just stared at it for ages and then when I went to write this piece, I thought, 'yeah that's what the title should be, *Soaring at Dawn*'. I've spent many mornings at about that time sitting at the beach watching the colours change. I really love that time of day, when it's really quiet and nobody's around. The way that the piece evolved - six movements - came to me as the awakening of the day. It's like the unravelling of dawn.

GK: I was present at the performance at Bennetts Lane, part of an audience that remained completely silent throughout, an unusual experience in most jazz venues. An Indian influence was evident in the movements called *Morning Raga*. Also I notice that you closed the concert with a trio performance which created a challenging platform for musical expression.

FB: In terms of going out into different ethnic music and exploring it, I am definitely interested in Indian music. It was deliberately Indian sounding, a lot of the suite had an Asian or a Middle Eastern flavour. That was quite deliberate in some aspects but it was more of an intuitive decision than a conscious one. They were sounds that I was finding intriguing and I've been practicing different modes and exploring different sounds. I knew that if we did a piece like that Indian influenced movement, David would have lots of sounds that would just sound gorgeous, the different cymbals and the way he plays the drums with his hands would sound like tablas. I wanted to bring that into it. I am really curious about the music of other cultures, because I haven't tapped into it so much in the past. But I'm tapping into it now.



Soprano saxophone specialist David Liebman : further study in the USA with him...



Fiona Burnett: going for something through music that is central to who I am and that is also honest...

GK: I understand that, in August, 2000 you will undertake further study in the USA with the soprano saxophone specialist David Liebman.

FB: I had a lesson with Liebman in 1998, which was the most intense four hours of my life. I was invited to attend a ten-day workshop that he will conduct this year for a small group of saxophonists. His approach to teaching is something that really resonated with me. The ways that he explains the ideas behind his teaching methods, his technique, his ways of practicing - whether it be changes, transcribing, or practicing rhythm - are things that I really related to. His practice systems are incredibly thorough. I was looking for someone to direct me in that way. I've always been quite dogmatic in my practice. He affirmed that approach to me and the energy which he brought to that was fantastic. He is an amazing person artistically, creatively, musically and, in terms of a thinker, someone who really thinks about his art and has discovered so much of himself through his art. All of those things were so inspiring for me and I thought, 'wow! I've come face to face with a master', and this is a scary thing. I was very humbled by that experience.

GK: What else for the future?

FB: I've got quite a few things I've got planned for myself prior to leaving for further study. I recently received a grant from the Contemporary Music Touring Program to tour my quartet nationally, so that's fantastic. I am happiest being in an environment in which I am able to further myself creatively as an improvising musician, as someone who's still learning from the history of the music and incorporating that, in order to express myself and create my own voice and further my own voice. So I'm hopefully, eventually, articulating and going for something through music that is central to who I am and that is also honest.

FIONA BURNETT DISCOGRAPHY

Morgana, *Talk Walk Whisper* (Newmarket Music NEW2008.2)

Morgana, *Have You Heard The News Today?* (NEW3033.2)

Fiona Burnett, *Venus Rising* (NEW3045.2)