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Jessica Cottis could pick out melodies on the piano
before she could form sentences.
Music has always been Jessica's language,
and it was her first doorway into awe and wonder.
And music is something that Jessica sees as well as hears.
She has Chromesthesia, or sound to colour synesthesia,
which means that different sounds evoke different colours for her.
And it was only as she grew older that Jessica realised
other people don't experience music that way.
When Jessica heard a pipe organ for the first time,
it was life-changing.
And she was building a career playing in the cathedrals
and concert halls of Europe,
when an injury turned her from playing music to conducting.
Jessica is now in her third year as Chief Conductor
and Artistic Director of the Canberra Symphony Orchestra.
I spoke with Jessica when she first took up those roles,
back in 2021.
Hi, Jessica. Hello.
Jessica, you came back home to Australia this year,
but you spent much of the pandemic in London.
How differently did London sound during the lockdown?
London was so extraordinarily quiet,
especially during the first lockdown last year.
It was as though, well, I mean, everything just stopped.
And it was kind of eerie, in a way, actually.
There was hardly any traffic on the roads.
There was very little noise outside.
And it was, in a way, I mean, it was an awful time,
but it was also a time when it was possible to hear the birds
and it was possible to hear a breeze through leaves and trees and so on.
Things that we wouldn't normally hear in a busy bustling city.
I spent two years living in Oxford,
and I think one of my favourite things was the sound of church bells,
which is so common, of course, in English and European places,
but it's not a feature of our sounds here so much.
No, it's not. Actually, that was one of the other things
that became so apparent during the lockdown.
A church a few blocks away where we were living in Kensington at the time
would peel on the hour, every hour.
And it's funny, you know, with busy life,
one recognises that those church bells are there,
but they're not a focal point of the day.

Being inside for really 23 hours a day meant that these bells became a kind of marker of the quietness.

Do you think that you can hear music differently when it's surrounded by that kind of quiet?

I mean, does that offer you a different container, or offer us all a different container to appreciate music?

Definitely.

I'm very interested in ways of listening, how we use our ears and how we interact with the sounds around us.

And I think if we're able to hear the smallest fragments of noise from, you know, our watch ticking to a distant car horn outside, then with that kind of mindful listening,

we can bring it into how we experience music as well,

and then the music can go through us,

through our minds and through our hearts, even more profoundly.

You're currently back in Canberra.

What are the distinctive sounds of Canberra for you?

Oh, magpies, definitely.

I would say nighttime possums, that kind of breathy possum noise.

But the wonderful birdlife here,

it's just so vibrant and busy,

and just I'm captivated by it every time.

And actually on my phone, I've got about 200, 300 recordings of birds, just from the last couple of months.

Every time I hear them, I'm just delighted by it.

Is it a homecoming for you?

Is Canberra home for you in a sense?

It is very much so.

I wasn't born here, but my family came back to Canberra every three years or so in between my father's postings.

And I did my undergraduate degree here as well.

I've been away from Canberra for 20 years,

but all of those formative memories are here,

so it's just wonderful to come back.

And I think also something about the landscape of this area of Australia, the rolling hills, the grass and eucalypt landscapes,

and the massive clear blue skies is something

that has really been carried with me wherever in the world I am.

You say your father's postings, what did he do?

And where else were you with him?

Yeah, so my father was, he worked as an Australian military attaché.

So we spent time in, my family spent time in the UK.

We were in America and Washington, D.C.

and also in Wellington and New Zealand.

So that's a lot of moving.

What does that do for a family dynamic, Jessica?

Do you become your own kind of first line of support?

Yeah, that's an interesting perspective actually.

I think all of us became extremely self-sufficient

because it's impossible to rely on the environment around you

because you know that even if you get settled in,

it's going to change quite quickly.

So there was a kind of flexibility, I think,

in how we were brought up

and how we were able to exist in any particular environment.

I find it interesting because it's not dissimilar to my life

as a conductor where I might be pre-COVID times,

I might be in three different countries

or a couple of different continents per month.

And what are your earliest memories of music?

When did music first grab you?

My earliest memories of music are very beautiful memories for me actually.

They're actually my earliest memories full stop

and it's sitting on my mother's lap very young

whilst she played piano and just sitting on her lap

and kind of ping-pong out a couple of notes as she played.

And yeah, really evocative sense of those early experiences really

and it happened quite frequently.

I often sat at the piano with her as she played.

She was a very fine amateur pianist.

It's a lovely memory because it's both the music and the relationship.

It's like reading with a child.

You kind of have that closeness as well as the creative aspect as well.

Definitely.

And I think also this element of music has a form of expression

beyond words or human interaction through language

that this sense of music is something to express and also to share with others.

And so did you start playing from such an early age?

I did, yes.

I started playing when I was about three

and for me it was a wonderful way to exist in the world.

I found it hard to express myself through talking, through words

and so music was a form of basically kind of being myself in a way

and feeling okay and being able to express myself in whatever way

without necessarily speaking and articulating how I felt.

What about the practice and the lessons that go along with mastering an instrument?

Jessica, how did that suit you as a kid?

Yeah, so this, well look, this is a little secret really.

I was terrible at practicing.

Really awful.

I did not like it.

I don't know why that is because certainly when I became a conductor, things turned around and I'm more than happy to spend hours and hours pouring over a score or a new piece of music.

As a child, I think playing music, playing piano was less about doing something.

It was a way of life and we don't really practice life.

We just do it and that was the same for piano with me.

I would just come home after school and play the piano for hours

without thinking of improving or practicing particular sections in a piece of music.

I just did it.

There was a lot of improvisation and sight reading and sort of just mucking around at the piano really.

Whereabouts in your house was the piano?

Was it in a public space or were you in a room by yourself?

Yeah, so piano was in the living room.

My poor siblings and parents had to put up with me playing the piano all the time.

I have a few memories of my father coming into the living room at 10 o'clock at night and saying, you know, that's enough now.

Please.

So did you always imagine yourself as a professional musician then?

No, not at all.

I'd never imagined I'd be a professional musician.

Again, it was just a way of being human really.

I was very interested in lots of things, sciences, history, paleontology, law, all kinds of elements.

And it was not until really in my late teens that I realised there could be a possibility to be a professional musician.

And that was very intoxicating to me.

Well, music sounds like it is quite intoxicating for you, Jessica, because your way of experiencing it is different from many other peoples.

What is the relationship between colour and music for you?

So when I hear music, I don't just hear it.

I also see colour related to that music in my mind's eye.

So this is a form of synesthesia where the two sensory elements are actually intertwined.

And what that means is when I'm conducting or when I'm in an audience or when I'm just listening to music in headphones,

I will have a visual understanding of a piece as well.

And for me, I think it's wonderful.

I feel it gives me extra insight into a piece of music.

And certainly when I'm rehearsing with orchestras, if I hear something and it's not quite right, then it will often manifest in my mind, in my visual perception,

that the only way I can really describe it is if you look at a picture and you've got the wrong lenses

on.
So it's kind of fuzzy.
And so I have this fuzziness, this kind of fuzzy A-logic in my head.
And it's then very clear to me how I need to get that back into focus through the combination of my ears
and the synesthesia.
And are different instruments always connected with different colours then?
Talk me through the orchestra for you in terms of colour.
Yeah, well, it works in a kind of multi-dimensional fashion.
So generally speaking, it would be harmony related or a combination of different notes together that would elicit certain colours.
And just to say it's not just necessarily block colours.
It's not that it's primary red or anything like that.
It will often be combinations of colours.
So it might be, for example, a light blue but with flecks of white and yellow
and maybe some golden hues, iridescence going through it at the same time.
But generally speaking, instruments do have slightly different colour worlds, I would say.
So for me, the string instruments, violins, double basses, cellos, violas,
tend to have more earthy tones, dark reds, vivid browns.
Whereas woodwind instruments, oboe flute, clarinet bassoon are invariably light blues, light greens,
that kind of quality.
And brass instruments, for me, are green within the realm of greenness of some sort.
And it's just so fascinating to hear you describe this.
Is it as you're listening, is it that you need to close your eyes to really sense that?
Even if you're looking at the musician playing the piece,
are you still having that sense of those colours in your mind somehow?
Yes, so a few people, very, very few people with synesthesia will actually see colour in their vision.
But this is, we're talking the smallest statistic there.
And so mine is seeing a colour in, I guess it's hard to describe, but it's in my mind's eye.
I feel, if you were to feel happy, you'd just know you felt happy.
And for me, I see a yellow hue and I feel that yellowness.
I can only really describe it as my mind's eye.
And how did you realise that not everybody had this experience when listening to music?
I actually thought that everybody was like this.
As a child, I assumed that everybody experienced this sound rushing through our ears
and also all these amazing pallets of colours.
And it was not until I was at school and I mentioned it to a couple of friends.
And they looked at me a bit strangely.
And I very quickly realised that this was something that was perhaps not as widely shared as I had
imagined.
Have you met people though, Jessica, that share this?
I mean, have you spoken to other people, have similar responses?
Yeah, very much so.
And I think in the arts and in music and visual arts in particular,

there seems to be quite a few people who are synesthetic.

And I find it fascinating speaking to others because I would say that so many people experience it in different ways.

So for example, I have a friend who every time she says her phone number, she gets seven different colours in her head.

And I was actually listening to someone speak a few months ago and he has an extraordinary kind of synesthesia whereby if somebody says a word to him, he actually experiences that as a flavour.

So some people's names could taste delicious like a marshmallow, say.

And other people's names could just be absolutely disgusting.

Like, toast, it's been burnt to a crisp.

How incredible.

Well, what does it mean for you and your appreciation of music?

I mean, some styles are they more appealing for you based on the colours they're connected with?

How does it affect what you like and what you don't like?

I think it's less to do with what I like or don't like so much

and more to do with how close I can feel, how profoundly linked I can feel to a piece of music.

And often I feel, especially if I'm conducting a piece of new music, something that's been written very recently.

And often new music is quite, it can be intractable in a way in understanding what has been written and why and how it's supposed to be sounding because nobody else has performed it before us.

And I often feel that if I don't see the colours vividly enough in my head then I haven't understood the language of that composer.

So it's kind of a marker of where I'm at in the process of understanding a musical world.

Many composers who I know very, very well, Sibelius Stravinsky, Richard Strauss, Wagner, Beethoven,

immediately I'm overwhelmed by colours when I listen or conduct their music because their language is so familiar to me.

I've told friends, I've worked with their music so many times that there's a large canvas that I already know and that I can build on and build within.

Tell me about the first time that you heard a pipe organ.

Yes, so the first time I heard a pipe organ I was astounded at two things really, well three things.

First of all, just how loud an organ can be.

But more importantly, the range of musical sounds that could come from just one instrument.

So I had come from the piano which is a beautiful instrument

and that can evoke so many qualities of sound and emotions and create so many musical stories.

But hearing an organ and hearing 60 different sounds all at once was very exciting for me

and then it tied into a very, very physical element was that when a pipe organ is played

a lot of it is about vibration, air within these pipes, but it actually vibrates as well, especially the lower sound.

So we're talking a couple of octaves below say what singing pitch would be.

Quite low sounds and that vibrates through a building

and you can actually feel it in the soles of your feet.

It's pretty amazing. It is actually pretty amazing.

And what colours does the organ, which range of that palette does it bring forth for you? Everything. It depends on the piece of music and the specific stops that are used on the organ. So the stops being different mechanisms to bring in different kinds and qualities of sound when you play one note.

It literally could be anything from the darkest of dark blues right through the spectrum to very bright glaring almost heavenly yellows and whites.

That extraordinary range and density of sound that an organ can create, how does that happen physically?

I mean, what are you doing with your hands when you're sitting at an organ to make such remarkable sounds come out of the instrument?

I often think being an organist one needs about six or seven different brains going at once because our hands are playing just like a piano, but there will be more than one keyboard.

So it's like maybe four keyboards stacked on top of each other and you might be jumping around these different keyboards.

They would have a different sound on each one.

Then you've got your feet playing their own keyboard at the same time.

That takes actually quite some dexterity to play with both hands and with your feet at the same time whilst also sitting on the organ bench and maintaining some kind of posture.

Now to add into the excitement either side of the keyboards are these, we call them stops and they're like, I don't know how to describe them actually, they're like bits of wood

and you basically pull them out by about 10 centimetres

and they allow the mechanism for that particular quality of sound to start up.

So you might be playing say eight bars of music and then you need it to be a bit louder so you'll pull out a couple of these stops.

Now this has to happen almost in sort of a quarter of a second.

So there's lots of jumping around.

Meanwhile, there are also pedals that you can use with your feet to crescendo and decrescendo as well, opening shutters.

So it's really multifunctional, multi-brained, highly dexterity requiring instrument.

I'm thinking Jessica of that game as a kid where you'd pat your tummy and rub your head in the opposite direction

and then reverse and how hard I found that.

So what you're describing is just quite remarkable to me, I have to say.

The fact that they're so huge and can be played in such sort of cavernous spaces.

How does that affect even, I guess, the speed that you're hearing the sound of what you're making?

I mean just for the sound to fill some of those huge cathedrals and concert halls.

There's often about a seven second, six, seven second delay as you play a note and it bounces around a cathedral or a chapel and then by the time it gets back to you, yeah, it's a few seconds later.

And it's always interesting, I found it interesting if I was working with a choir that you would see the chorus director maybe from 20 meters away, but in a mirror next to the music stand on the organ.

So you're looking at a small mirror, they're way behind you, watching them conduct.

And then you have to work out how long the delay is so that you can preempt it.
So I would see a downbeat from the conductor where I needed to place my chord
and know that I would need to be at least a second and a half, maybe two seconds ahead of that.
So it's also like reverse parking as well, it just gets more and more terrifying to me, Jessica.
Yeah, you really, you develop a sense of real confidence and you have to be quite brave, I think.
Tell me about where you made your debut playing in Europe.
My debut in Europe was at Westminster Cathedral in London.
That's straight with the big guns. What was that experience like?
It was amazing at such an incredible building and when you go in there, it's, I mean, it's on such a
busy road in London,
but you go inside and it's almost silent, it's just so quiet and incredibly peaceful.
And the organ is immense, I mean, it's gargantuan, and then playing within this space was such an
immersive experience.
And yeah, it was a long time ago now, but I still feel tingles thinking about it.
The fact that you're not looking at your audience, do you still have a sense of their presence
and of how they're responding to the sounds you're creating there at the organ?
Definitely. An attentive audience is a quiet audience
and there's no coughing, there's no fidgeting, and that's something that we can all sense, I think, in
a space, in a hall or a cathedral,
whether everyone is there listening together.
And I find it even today conducting when I walk on stage, and again, my back is to the audience.
I never faced the audience, I never did as an organist and I still don't as a conductor.
But there's this sense of feeling a collective energy of the audience behind me
and when the audience is really into a performance and a piece of music, there's a kind of...
it's very non-scientific, but there is a kind of buzz in the hall.
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So, Jessica, you were launching into this amazing career as an organist, making your debut at
Westminster Cathedral.
What happened?
I got something called carpal tunnel syndrome, which is where the nerves in your wrist get
compressed from the lining out around the nerves.
And what that meant in reality was that when I was playing, I actually lost sensation of my fourth
and fifth fingers.
They became quite numb and I was unable to move them properly at fast enough, or even just
control them really.
And I had given... I was giving a recital and I was playing a couple of very large pieces by Franz List,
highly virtuosic.
And I got to one point where my fingers, they just literally stopped working.
They just would not work.
It didn't matter how hard I concentrated, they wouldn't do what I needed them to do.
And I had a massive rush of adrenaline and I improvised my way through.
Thankfully, I was a good improviser and did that actually for a couple of minutes and managed to

pick it up again

and got to the end of the piece and got to the end of the recital and it was great, it was well received.

But I left that recital thinking, I can't do this anymore.

It's just, it's too risky and I have no idea when my fingers might just stop working.

So I had all the treatment and it just, it did work, but not sufficiently well that I could continue professionally.

I still play now for my own pleasure, but I could never be back to that professional level because of that overuse injury really.

That must have been just devastating, Jessica, at the time.

It was really, really dark days.

And I think if we remember that my earliest memories were playing the piano and my earliest forms of expression were making music,

then to be in a position where I was unable to do that anymore was just, I mean, just awful, really dark days.

After that, you had a brief foray into studying law.

What brought you back to music?

You're right, I was studying law and I found it fascinating and intellectually stimulating.

But I realized that I didn't really feel very alive and that one huge component of me was missing.

I really had to go back into music in some way, shape or form.

And I was thinking about really what I could do and I was in Vienna actually visiting a friend who was studying there and we went to the State Opera House.

We got some student tickets for I just like five euros or something like that.

And I saw a number of performances, but one of those performances was Richard Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier*.

And I was just completely blown away by this epic sound world and the size of the orchestra and the way that the orchestral sound mingled with the voices and how it all sounded within this theatre.

I just kept thinking it was so velvety, there was something very velvety about it all.

And it was in that performance I thought to myself, maybe I could do that.

Maybe I could be that person in front of that orchestra conducting and making this music in this way.

How do you go about learning conducting?

How do you go from having that thought while listening to this wonderful music in Vienna to learning how to conduct?

For me, it was sheer motivation, determination, bullheadedness in a way.

Once I'd made the decision that was that I went on a couple of conducting courses and then I thought, well, I need to study this properly.

I need to go and do a masters in conducting and so I researched the best places in the world.

And I thought, well, I'm going to apply to them and see what happens.

Maybe it won't work out, but at least I know I have tried.

And one of those places was the Royal Academy of Music in London and it was three days of auditions.

Three days? What did you have to do on those days?

So much.

So the first day was about an hour audition with pianos.

If you got past that round, then you were allowed to go to the next day, which was auditions with a chamber orchestra.

Where you were conducting?

Yes.

Having never actually professionally been a conductor before?

Correct.

Yeah.

So then that was chamber orchestra.

And then the next day you had to come back and conduct the full symphony orchestra and do some oral tests where they played, you know,

somebody basically put their hands on a piano keyboard and there were 15 notes and they said write down all 15 notes, that kind of thing.

And I got in and I wasn't quite sure why I got in because I didn't feel like I'd had the experience.

But what I do know is I knew what I wanted from the music.

I knew how I wanted it to sound.

And all of those years as an organist and even my early training as a pianist had made me in many ways a fully formed musician,

as fully formed as one can ever be as a musician because it's a lifelong pursuit.

And really what I needed to learn was to nuance and develop my technique in being able to show that to orchestra players.

And I spoke to the head of department actually at the Royal Academy afterwards when I said to him, you know,

what were you thinking when you accepted me?

And he said, look, we took a risk on you, but it was a calculated risk.

We knew that you had something that we had to invest in.

So yeah, I feel very lucky that they saw that in me.

And then once you are training, Jessica, are there standard conducting techniques?

Is there much room for you to bring your own particular form of expression to this to this work of conducting?

It depends where one study is conducting.

But for me, our professors, our main professor was very interested in the Russian school, which is in a nutshell, because it would take me about a year to describe it properly, physically and philosophically and psychologically and all of those kind of things.

But in a nutshell, we as conductors show the tempo and the beat and where each beat is supposed to be played.

But in this school, it's a lot about what happens in between the beats.

So how we carry sound as it were from one place to another.

So each time we arrive at one note, it is both an arrival and it's also a departure at exactly the same time,

because it's part of a much longer line that kind of really never stops until we get to the end of a piece of music.

And in terms of a baton, it can be held in a myriad of ways.

All of my students hold a baton in the way that I was taught,

which is this wooden part of the baton really firmly in their hand.
So there's a real connection to the stick very much in a way that it would be like, that the baton is almost like a violin bow connecting with the strings to make a sound. But I had another teacher at the Royal Academy, Sir Colin Davis, who had a baton that was, it had like a piece of wood at the end of it that was about the size of a squash ball. And he'd kind of fiddle with it in his fingers, just in the tips of his fingers, and he'd have a very kind of loose hold of the baton that would elicit a wonderful, wonderful sound. Sometimes you can look like a conductor does so little really, and sometimes incredibly expressive and full of movement. Where do you fall on that spectrum yourself?
Oh, I think probably I would be, yeah, I'd be on the more expressive, athletic side of things. I would much rather show music through my physicality, through the way I move my hands, my arms and my body, and how I can physically affect the sound by changing my posture and so on, than speak lots in a rehearsal. Because it's very intuitive really making music. And if, for example, I was playing chamber music as a pianist with some string players, we would just lift our head up and down to start a piece of music. We would move naturally in conjunction with the shape of the music. Why is it that conducting has been such a blokey world for so long?
I think it's historical in that most leadership positions have been historically male, and that's been how the world has eventuated and developed. I would say that there's absolutely nothing about conducting that makes it male or female or just gendered at all. And the same with music, it's just about people full stop. You graduated in 2009. Have you seen a change even in that across your career in a relatively short time? Is it more common to have women in the role of conductor?
Definitely. When I graduated, I think I was the first female conductor who'd gone through the course in about 10 years. Yeah, and now I think it's about half-half, and it has been for a couple of years. But I would say one of the biggest issues with conducting, and it still is today, and it's not just to do with gender, it's to do with access to music generally, is the opportunity for young people to think, oh, maybe I could become a conductor myself, especially for little girls. When I was young, I never once imagined I would be a conductor. I didn't think that women conducted because I hadn't seen a female conductor. And if I think back, I made my debut at the BBC PROMs about four or five years ago now. You really did these debuts in style, don't you, Jessica? Westminster Cathedral, BBC PROMs? If you're going to do a debut, you may as well make it a good one. But sorry, so you did your debut there?
Yeah, and this concert actually was for amazing couple of concerts. It was for CBBs, and I guess the Australian equivalent to that is... Children's television, I know it well. Yeah, like that kind of play school kind of age, maybe, up to five.

[Transcript] Conversations / Jessica Cottis – inside the colour of sound

And so the Albert Hall, Royal Albert Hall, which seats about 6,000 people, was full of four-year-olds. And it was just like the roof was lifting off.

It was incredible.

And these kids went, like, they were so excited.

Now, this was so popular that I started getting fan mail from three or four-five-year-olds through their parents.

And actually, I still get spotted in London on the tube or on trains and so on, because it was televised.

It comes out every couple of months.

So I get, like, little kids waving at me and shouting,

Hello, Jessica! Anyway, one of the letters from a little girl, she described lots of things that she loved about the concert and so on.

And then there was this one line that really has stuck with me, and she said,

When I grow up, I want to be a conductor just like you, Jessica.

And then I can boss the music men around.

I just thought this was so...

You know, I can't imagine that having happened ten years earlier.

And I can say also there were letters, similar letters from little boys as well.

So it was very open and lots of kids from lots of different backgrounds and so on, all writing in.

It was just really wonderful.

That's wonderful.

Well, she saw it as bossing. How do you see it?

When you walk into a rehearsal room on day one,

what kind of relationship are you there to establish with that group of musicians who presumably know each other very well, but they may be new to you?

Yeah, so each orchestra is its own life force.

And it's a fascinating experience, really.

So I've done all of my thinking and my time with the piece of music.

I have a very strong vision, a very strong sound of the piece already in my head.

Now, if I come in and work with an orchestra, then they have their own way of being as well.

And sometimes those elements are things that I would like to look to see if we could lift and develop.

And often orchestras also come with their own ideas and individual players.

Often players who are much, much older than me as well,

and they've maybe played in an orchestra for 40 years already, that they have their own ideas.

And so there's this beautiful connection actually that can happen

whereby I come with my vision, my sound, and I conduct.

And if we think of the word conductor and its links, I guess to the word, say conduit,

where something is being passed from one place to another, then I'm doing that with my conducting.

But as I do that, they're also doing the same back.

So, you know, the principal flute has a solo.

He or she plays that.

And I think to myself, in the moment, in a split second, in a twentieth of a second, that is wonderful.

Let's go with that.

And then it's just back and forth the whole time within the structure of my vision for a piece.

And I think often with music, we have to form these structures, and within those structures, the emotion and life and connection comes forth.

What about nerves, Jessica, before an opening night?

How are you feeling backstage?

Before an opening night, I'm usually extremely excited, and I have to be really careful that I don't overdo things during the day so that I can keep that energy for the evening.

I tend not to get particularly nervous, generally speaking.

However, I will always be nervous before a first rehearsal, especially with an orchestra I don't know.

So the first sort of an hour or so before the first rehearsal, I'm, yeah, I am quite nervous.

And then I'll go into the rehearsal and I'll start conducting,

and I get to know them musically, what they sound like, and very, very quickly that dissipates.

And how is it after the final bow and the curtain comes down or you all walk off stage, how long does it take you to come back to reality?

It can take a while, actually.

The thing I like best, actually, is just to experience all of that and then have some quiet time where that adrenaline and that energy and just the experience of making that music and that one-offness of live music, just taking the time to really savor that in a way.

And then that calms me back down again.

Do those melodies, does that music permeate your dreams after you've been conducting a piece?

Constantly, yeah, constantly, every second of the day, every second of my sleep as well, until I conduct another piece and then that piece goes in and it's there all the time.

As we've been saying, you were living in London during lockdown last year.

Tell me what happened one afternoon in December.

Yeah, so late December last year I was out going for a walk as I do every day and it was a Sunday and sort of mid-afternoon and I was walking along and I saw some people walking towards me and I thought, well, that's a bit strange, especially during COVID where one tries to maintain a distance.

And as they came towards me, I realized that it was going to be very difficult for me to move out of the way,

but I did and then just as they were going past me,

yeah, unfortunately, actually, there was, well, I don't know how to describe it really, but I was quite brutally attacked.

It was a very random attack.

I had my face punched and my nose broken and one of them threw, we think it was a glass bottle at my forehead, at my head as well.

Jessica, that's so awful and this was just random.

You'd never met them.

These are just strangers.

Totally random, total strangers, totally unprovoked.

I didn't even have my phone out or anything.

Did they rob you?

No, nothing like that.

It was some kind of just, I guess, I don't know,
but some kind of attack for the sake of it, boredom, entertainment, I don't know.
It's really horrific.

How horrible and I mean, it sounds, it's such a violent attack.

How bad were your injuries after that?

Yeah, well, I sustained quite a bad concussion actually,
although I didn't know it exactly at that time.

It's very interesting actually to learn what our flight or fight reactions might be
and mine was fight, so I shouted at them and chased after them, trying to take their breath.
Chased after them?

I did.

I think that was probably unwise, but I did and off they went.

And then I made my way back home, realizing that it's just such a splitting pain in my head
and I was actually quite worried because there was some kind of liquid there as well.

But it became very apparent in the next 24 hours that I had sustained quite a bad concussion
and that meant actually for me the next couple of months were quite literally spent sleeping
almost 20 hours a day.

Very, very difficult to stay awake for any length of time, a couple of hours at a time
just to get up and eat something and a little walk and then back to bed again.

How badly did that shake your faith in the world?

I mean, as well as the physical pain, there's the terrible sort of emotional assault of a random attack
like that.

I think it's very sad that there can be that kind of violence.

I mean, any violence, but particularly this, there was absolutely no point in it.

And it's inhumane and very, I guess, objectifying in a way that a person could be used for
entertainment, I guess, in a way.

So I feel very saddened by it, whilst also knowing that statistically in London such things do happen.
It was unusual and I happen to be at a not good place at a not good time.

But yeah, I feel very saddened by it.

Were those people caught?

Jessica, did you have to do a whole legal reality after that too?

Yeah, so the police have been involved and so on and it's actually, it's still ongoing in some respects.
Play a part in your recovery. Was it a comfort in the months after that attack?

Very much so.

Initially, I was too unwell to really listen to anything.

I just really required quiet and yeah, a very quiet existence.

But as I began to feel a bit better, I started listening to music again.

And I think that's when I felt like I had turned the first corner where I went back to music.

And there are a number of pieces of music that really helped me.

I listened to a lot of Bach, which has felt very clearheaded in a way.

And also quite a lot of Wagner, which is so the way that Wagner uses harmony.

And there's so much ambiguity in the musical lines and how he stretches our expectations.

I think everything seems to go in half speed in a way that was the perfect kind of oral world for how
I was feeling at that time.

[Transcript] Conversations / Jessica Cottis – inside the colour of sound

It's not only music that brings you joy and interest, Jessica.

When you're on tour, when you do get those chances to work away from home, what do you like to do with your spare time?

I'm very, very interested in the natural world from animals to the earth itself, to trees and plants of any kind.

But one of my great fascinations is butterflies and moths.

And so wherever I'm working, wherever I am in the world, I will always make time and connect with other leperdoctors if I can in any particular area.

And make time to go and observe butterflies, which brings so much joy.

I find them absolutely fascinating.

And where have been some of your great butterfly experiences?

I say Southeast Asia is one of the most amazing places just because of the huge range and huge number of butterflies.

And also just the colours and the size.

I mean, some of them, you know, Raja Brooks Birdwing, for example, in Malaysia.

It's the size of a bird. It's enormous.

But also the colours of these semi-tropical, tropical butterflies is so vivid, the scales on their wings and that iridescence.

It's amazing to see and to see it flit past.

Well, that is the nature of butterflies is so fleeting.

That's what they're like to look at.

And that's their life as well.

Does that evoke music and performance in you too?

I see a connection there.

Very much so.

I would say there are two elements.

One is a fascination in the concept of flight and flying.

And that when we ourselves are above, say in an aeroplane or at the top of a mountain, we're able to see a different view.

That's a much more broader view from above.

So there's that interest with the butterflies as well.

But certainly the ephemeral nature of performing when we play a piece of music, when we play a symphony or a concerto, it happens once and it is never the same.

And you're either there to experience it, which is fantastic, or you're not.

And it's very much the same with butterflies, this being really in the moment.

Jessica, what a delight to speak with you.

Thank you so much for being my guest on Conversations.

A real pleasure. Thank you.

You've been listening to a podcast of Conversations with Sarah Kanoski.

For more Conversations interviews, head to the website abc.net.au.