

KINDRED PEOPLE DECOLONISING THE BELLS

5 September



Reimagining
sound, memory &
colonial symbols

Artistic Team

Lead Artist Aaron Wyatt

Collaborating Artist Kaylie Melville

Decolonising Practices Consultant Amy Spiers

Bell Players Students from Worawa Aboriginal College and Monash University

Lighting Bronwyn Pringle

Sound Consultant Alistair McLean

Clapsticks Instrument Design and Creation Adam Manning

Technical Support, Set Design and Construction Rohan Goldsmith

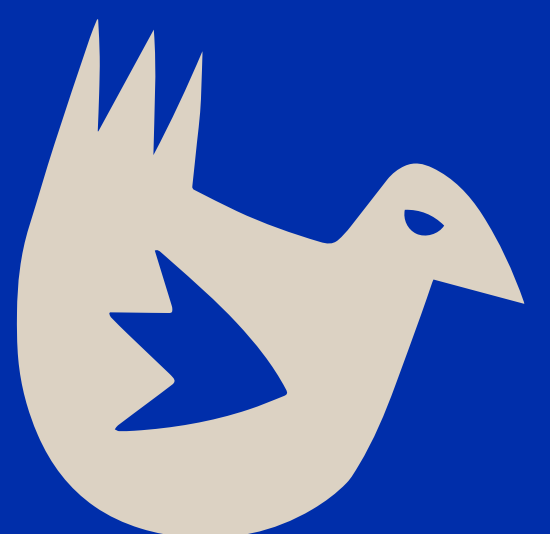
Bell Curve Composer Eugene Ughetti

Bell Curve Source Materials Speak Percussion

Producer Biddy Connor



Image: Darren Gill



Composer's Note

Aaron Wyatt

Decolonising the Bells feels to me like a happy accident, brought together by fate, that was somehow always meant to happen. In 2022 I had begun undertaking an artistic residency with Speak Percussion and had the luxury of playing around in the studio with a whole raft of percussion instruments, sticking transducers to them and seeing what sounds they would make if I played various bits of audio through them (including the live sound of the viola). It was during a discussion over lunch, my head still squarely in the world of this first project, *Digital Echoes*, that another offer came. Speak was in the process of putting in an expression of interest to take custodianship over a number of sets of the Federation Handbells, held previously by the Melbourne Museum who had clearly become weary of the endless cycle of warehousing them and loaning them out. Eugene Ughetti, then Artistic Director of Speak, had previously written a work for these bells that was designed to be quickly and easily taught to groups of community musicians who might not have had much formal musical training. The offer was for me to take this work, *Bell Curve*, and use it in whatever way I wanted to form the basis for a new piece. A work that would interrogate and attempt to dismantle the historic baggage of these bells, and their connection to federation.

To stay true to its origins this new work, *Decolonising the Bells*, uses almost the same set up as *Bell Curve*. A few extra bells, a viola, and some better bell stands have been thrown into the mix. And the score is delivered in a different way – *Decolonising the Bells* uses animated graphic notation on iPads unlike *Bell Curve*'s audio score where players receive instructions over headphones^[1].

But otherwise, they share a lot in common. The electronic track for the piece builds on techniques that I have used to explore similar themes in earlier works. *Moving On*, a commission for the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts, uses some heavily manipulated samples of the Beck square piano and another ruined piano for its electronic track. The Beck is a likely candidate to be the piano that came over with the ship's surgeon on the First Fleet, and digitally reversing and stretching its sound gives it an ethereal, almost synthesizer-like quality that seems to liberate the instrument from its past. In *Decolonising the Bells*, this sort of manipulation is done on samples taken from a recording of *Bell Curve*.

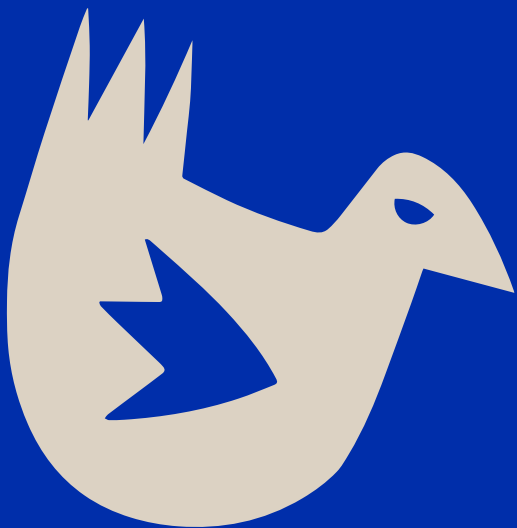


The resulting sonic landscape is at times surreal and at times uplifting. Sounds emerge gradually from silence only to cut off abruptly. Bell chimes slide down in pitch, like a disintegrating clock. And long drones build to form a wash of sound.

The stars aligned again, with the timing of the work’s development allowing it to be included here in Monash’s Kindred People festival. The David Li Sound Gallery is the perfect venue for the electronic track to be truly immersive. And for this premiere performance, students from Worawa Aboriginal College are joined by music students from Monash University to play the bells. A conscious decision to show that while Indigenous people are front and centre here, the work of decolonisation and tackling systemic inequality is something that we all must do.



Image: Darren Gill



Artistic Director's Note

Kaylie Melville

Back in the year 2000, governments across so-called Australia were preparing to celebrate the centenary of Federation: one hundred years since six separate British colonies willingly united to form the Commonwealth of Australia on January 1, 1901.

The Howard government spent \$3.2 million on an advertising campaign that asked if Australians could name the first Prime Minister. Most couldn't. The media bemoaned our society's lack of historical knowledge.

Watching that campaign back with Aaron and Dr Amy Spiers this year during the development of *Decolonising the Bells*, we were also struck by a lack of knowledge – but in a markedly different way. The campaign claimed that Australia was formed “with a vote, not a war.”

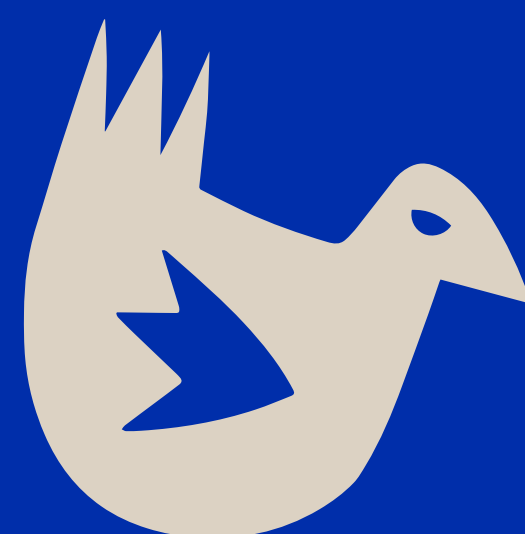
The exclusion of First Nations history, of the brutality of the frontier wars, is an erasure of the literal and symbolic violence of colonisation. Celebrations of Federation aspire to be moments of unification, while by their very nature excluding the people who have the deepest connection of all to this country.

In Victoria, the State Government undertook a similar celebratory Federation project. A collection of over 2000 bells were created, designed as a gift to the Victorian people and celebrating “the power of bells to call people together”.

For years, the Federation Handbells were made available for anyone to hire for a very small fee, with the goal of making them as accessible as possible. The bells were used by schools, community groups, orchestras, opera companies. They have been a beloved resource that have allowed so many people to participate in the wonderful, joyful, communal act of making music together.

And yet, the name. In the spirit of truth-telling, in the spirit of inclusion, surely it must change. But to what? And who gets to choose?

Questioning is a vital part of the decolonisation process. There are so many colonial systems and structures in our society that have become the assumed default. This impacts so many areas of our lives, including – for many of us – how we make and play music.

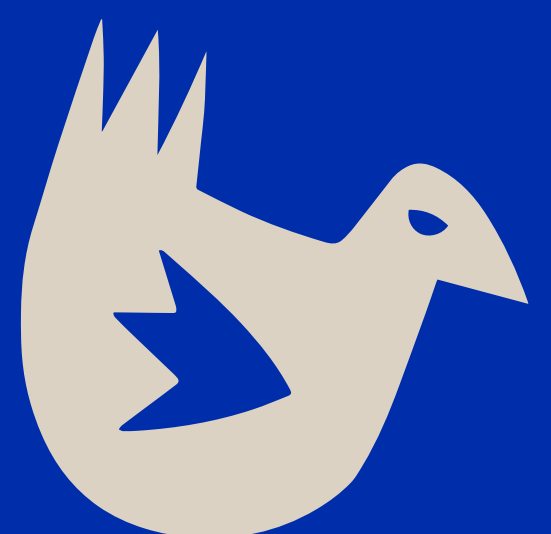


Aaron has unwound much of this thinking in *Decolonising the Bells*. Recordings are stretched, distorted, reversed to create a sonic reimagining of the instrument's history. Bell mallets are exchanged for beautiful custom-made clapsticks, created for this project by Kamilaroi man Adam Manning. The performers pass on instruments, trade places, gather around particular set ups; a performance mode that places emphasis on reciprocation, care and creating space.

Decolonising the Bells does not offer a neat, clean answer as to how the bells should be renamed. Instead, it poses a series of questions. What does genuine inclusivity look like? What power does art have to make change, for individuals, communities, countries? What are the limits of symbolic action? The conversation – much like the vital work of decolonisation -- is ongoing.



Image: T J Garvie



Supporters

Decolonising the Bells would not have been possible without the support of the following people and organisations.

SPEAK PERCUSSION



Australian Government



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