

Local composers take cue from Nature

By Tara Werner

IT must have something to do with the strength of our natural environment, but there seems to be an interesting thread running through the New Zealand works in a series of free lunchtime and late-morning concerts continuing at the Auckland City Art Gallery tomorrow and Saturday for three consecutive weeks.

The sea, for example, has had a profound effect on many of our composers. Take the Quintet for Winds by Douglas Lilburn. Images of the sea pervade the work, written in 1957 when Lilburn was living at Paekakariki, on the coast north of Wellington.

Similarly Gillian Whitehead's *Manutaki*, an evocation of Whatipu, the wild and beautiful west coast north of the Manukau Heads. The composer indicates that *Manutaki* (meaning the lead bird in a flock) contains music that suggests the darting flight of sea swallows around the Whatipu cliffs.

And nature also seems to dominate Lyell Cresswell's *Caves*, inspired by the Jenolan caves in the Blue Mountains of Australia. Cresswell says that each of the pieces has a descriptive title taken from a guide book that lists the three irresistible forces to which the limestone caves owe their existence: minute submarine animals, geological upheaval and sculpting by the elements.

However, the facet that makes this series of contemporary music, performed by members of the Auckland Philharmonia, particularly interesting is the juxtaposition of 20th century "greats" such as Stravinsky, Prokofiev and Schnittke with a wide variety of scores from local composers.

A deliberate programming ploy, says Nigel Keay, the Auckland Philharmonia's composer-in-residence: "We are aiming to promote New Zealand new music and thought the best way would be to balance it with works from well-known 20th century composers. Not only does this give a wider variety, but a balance to the programmes as well."

Keay's own music tends to be more abstract than programmatic; his highly rhythmic and virtuosic Sextet has been written for the unusual combination of flute, clarinet, bass trombone, violin, viola and double bass.

A viola player who is performing in most of the concerts, Keay admits that writing for such a combination may entail dealing with balance problems, but says it has given him insights into the potential of each instrument and also helped him with orchestration.

"THE idea for the piece originally came from a trombone player who wanted something interesting for the instrument, and since I'd just completed a string quartet, I thought a mixed ensemble would be great."

The composer is in good company; Stravinsky's Septet, featuring in the same concert on Thursday, October 26, has an equally interesting instrumentation that combines piano with wind and strings.

Unusual instrumentation is another thread woven through the series: a rare ensemble of eight cellos is given an airing in Villa-Lobos' *Bachianas Brasileiras No 1*, and percussion features in two pieces by the local group From Scratch.

Keay says the series is chamber music with a difference: "It's given Auckland Philharmonia players the chance to play something different, and audiences the chance to enjoy music that normally doesn't get a chance to be heard."