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From Hogarth to Westconnex: Wendy Sharpe tackles contemporary Sydney

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In a colourful studio at St Peters, artist Wendy Sharpe and cellist James Beck are planning a very Sydney event.

The Archibald Prize winner will sketch her own version of a lively Hogarth engraving on stage while the Australian Art Quartet plays Handel, Part and Shostakovich.



"You want to gasp at the wonderfulness of the whole experience" ... Wendy Sharpe with James Beck at her St Peters studio. Photo: Daniel Munoz

Over 50 minutes, their collaboration will be a Hogarth-style take on the hectic city as part of a new two-day festival at the City Recital Hall.

As Sharpe works in charcoal and pastel, the emerging sketch will be projected onto a giant screen above the musicians.

In a scene that will feel familiar to many Sydneysiders, Hogarth's *The Enraged Musician* shows a violinist upset about the raucous street noises outside his window.



William Hogarth's *The Enraged Musician*.

Updating the 1741 scene, Sharpe plans to turn a milk maid carrying a pail into a modern woman on her phone. A knife sharpener will get a pneumatic drill. A church steeple will become Sydney Tower.

"It's hard to depict noise because I don't want to have 'zzz zzz zzz' or have little lines like a cartoon," she says. "I'll have to show noise."

Sharpe wants her version to be a spirited comment on the WestConnex motorway that has seen dozens of homes razed in a corridor just metres from her studio.

"I think WestConnex is a disgusting waste of our money and it's creating more problems and more traffic," she says. "We need a decent train system to get cars off the road."

Sharpe and the quartet collaborated on another innovative show, featuring composer Andrew Batt-Rawden in the nude, last year.

She wants their new collaboration to be an intense sensory experience.

"We've moved away from that in a lot of art forms," she says. "If we have a good play or great music or wonderful ballet, we need to have not much to look at so visually everything is minimal schminimal."



William Hogarth's *Self-Portrait with Pug-Dog*.

"But why not have everything pitched up so it's overwhelming? You're in the audience and you want to gasp at the wonderfulness of the whole experience."

Beck, the quartet's artistic director, says working with Sharpe is a way of bringing music alive.

"It's about reminding the audience that this music was once just as alive as their senses are right now," he says. "It might be a hundred years old or it might be five years old but it's all contemporary."

"It's all written by a human. It's about human stories."

Identifying with the musician seeking some peace so he can work, Beck is a longtime fan of the Hogarth engraving.

"He's someone who made the 18th century come alive," he says. "It's social satire, social observation – the visual equivalent of Dickens."

"He makes these people flesh and blood and you understand what their lives were like."

"Wendy is someone who does the same in contemporary life. They're both absolutely keen observers of the human condition."

The festival, Unashamedly Original, features seven experimental concerts on July 22 and 23.