Simone Young Honorary Doctorate Speech
Verburgghen Hall, Sydney Conservatorium of Music

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I had a chequered career at the Conservatorium. It started back in 1976, when, identified as someone with potential while still in high school, I was extraordinarily lucky to receive a scholarship to take composition lessons with the late Dr Martin Wesley-Smith.

My weekly visits to Martin's workshop – down the side here and built rather like a cage in the corridor – opened my eyes and ears to music I had never heard nor imagined.

This magical box of a room was furnished with an exotic array of analogue electronic synthesisers, tape machines and sound desks, but also a decent upright piano and a large table. We spent happy and hugely enriching hours splicing tapes, playing with loops, analysing complex harmonic structures and playing and singing my latest inventions together on the old upright.

Martin opened my strict classically-trained musical mind to all the wonders of the exciting but daunting and confusing world of contemporary music in the 70s – extreme serialism, reactionary harmonic conservatism and the huge divide between "intellectual music" and music that entertained. We discussed the validity of such divides and touched on the political and social upheavals of the day.

Coming as I did from a highly traditional convent education and a fairly humble suburban middle-class family with three immigrant grandparents, I would walk through the door into that workplace each Wednesday afternoon like Alice falling down the rabbit hole into a world at once strange, remarkable and intriguingly engaging. If Martin were here, I think he would approve of the metaphor.

So I started a B.Mus here as a composition major, with Don Banks as my teacher – another exceptional composer and educator, of a different generation and genre – and I seemed set on a path that would lead to a life of composing and academia. Wrong! Very early on I learnt that while all the composition studies appealed to my intellectual side, I was happiest when making music with others, accompanying singers and playing chamber music. And these were very different times. I was the only girl in my year of seven composers, and there were none on the faculty. I had read all that I could get my hands on about Nadia and Lili Boulanger, the French sisters who composed and conducted, but on a budget that was dictated by my waitressing at Pizza Hut, France was an impossible dream.

Undecided, discontented and lacking a pathway, I dropped out – despite advice, concern and the offer of a second chance. I taught piano and discovered local musical and light opera groups, and started conducting them. Here I had found a fusion of the intellectual challenges of composition and orchestration, with the joy of sharing music-making with friends and colleagues. And now, more than forty years later, I am still doing much the same thing, just on a slightly bigger scale!

To get some qualifications, I went back to the Con and did a postgraduate course in repetiteur studies. For the uninitiated, that’s a conductor’s assistant and pianist/coach for singers. Most of my heroes began that way, and I followed them – into rehearsal studios of opera, then to orchestral rehearsals when the boss couldn’t make it, and finally, one day, into a performance, usually in sink or swim circumstances.

The rest of the story has been repeated in many an article, a couple of books and even some documentaries. I really never expected that so many people would be interested in what I do, or find it of significance.

The 13th-century poet Rumi wrote: When I am silent, I fall into that place where everything is music. In our crazy and dangerous world, finding silence can be a challenge. The incessant shouting of social media, the screaming of the news of

pain and destruction – these are hard to close out in order to examine our own thoughts and emotions. But music can still the noise and focus our minds and hearts because it is an abstract – it does not impose its meaning on us, but rather invites or inspires us to find that meaning within ourselves.

Live music can never be replaced by AI, although people will certainly try. There is an honesty and humanity in one person playing music for another. There is nowhere to hide, it is raw, naked and personal. And that honesty is powerful. I was once part of a jury for a BBC TV reality show, in which celebrities learnt to "conduct" a short piece of classical music. Some could not read music, they did it by ear; they were eliminated fairly quickly, as conducting means instigating the music, not following it. The winner, an English comedian, Sue Perkins, wrote an article about how personally challenging the communication between a conductor and their orchestra was. She said that she looked at and listened to the musicians with an intensity that she would normally reserve for an intimate friend, and that the honesty and vulnerability that was demanded from a conductor was very intimidating.

Her description of the role fascinated me – most people see the conductor as a power figure, the final dinosaur left from the 19th-century, highly hierarchical construct of top-down decision making. She saw it as I see it: a baring of one's soul and mind, in order to appeal to the souls and minds of the wonderful musicians of the orchestra, so that, together, you can create something that moves, informs, challenges and inspires an audience. And as such, it is a very human undertaking.

I am privileged to travel the world and work with some of the most wonderful musicians in the world. And I have the rather unbelievable honour of performing regularly with the wonderful Sydney Symphony Orchestra in my beloved home town of Sydney. I receive gratefully, if sometimes rather incredulously, great praise for what I do, and I have been honoured by governments, foundations and institutions. I do wonder sometimes if I should have done something different with my talents – become a lawyer and tried to legislate for a fairer world, been a

doctor and tried to save lives, or become a writer and sought to change minds by my words. I voiced these doubts at a dinner once, when I was seated next to the late Hon. Jane Matthews, an amazing woman who was the first woman appointed to the NSW Supreme Court, amongst many other distinctions of her truly impressive life. She was sitting on a particularly grizzly trial at the time, and I suggested to her that perhaps I should have done something “more useful” with my life. She was appalled, and paid me perhaps the greatest compliment I have ever received: “listening to what you do gives me the strength to do what I do”.

And tonight you do me the extraordinary honour of giving me a Doctor of Music from my alma mater.

To say that I am deeply grateful and humbled by this seems too prosaic. All I know is that that fifteen-year-old girl, removing her school hat as she prepared to step each Wednesday from the real world into the magical mystery that was Martin Wesley-Smith’s composition studio, could never have even dreamed of such a thing.