

# LIMELIGHT

## Music, Arts & Culture

Review

### Ned Kelly (Lost & Found Opera, Perth Festival)

Luke Styles' strong score is impressive in this new chamber opera, though the storytelling could be developed.

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by [Jo Litson](#) on 20 February, 2019

In his program note for *Ned Kelly*, Australian-born, London-based composer Luke Styles (36) says: "I knew I wanted to write an Australian opera and the image of the Kelly armour was an irresistible operatic magnet that drew me to this myth."

Watching Samuel Dundas as Ned Kelly, dressed in his makeshift armour with its iconic helmet, and staggering as the police bullets rain down on him at Glenrowan, while the lighting suddenly illuminates the bush behind the performance venue with a dark pink hue, is one of the most haunting images in this chamber opera – and one that I will long remember. But the opera itself doesn't make quite such a vivid impression, despite a strong score.



**Samuel Dundas as Ned Kelly.**  
**Photograph © Toni Wilkinson**

It doesn't take much to see why a mythologised anti-hero like Ned Kelly would appeal to a composer and librettist. His story has become a legend of operatic scale in this country – a story of a bushranger who was said to be loyal and nurturing to his family, who particularly adored his mother (a point made strongly and repeatedly in this opera), whose family struggled with poverty and persecution by the police, who protested against that mistreatment and preached republican ideals, who become increasingly vengeful and violent, and who finally met his end when he was hanged at Melbourne gaol aged just 25.

With a libretto by Peter Goldsworthy, the 90-minute chamber opera moves from 1878 to 1880. Described by Goldsworthy as a “three-act pub crawl”, its key scenes take place in the Euroa Hotel, the Royal Mail Hotel in Jerilderie, and the Glenrowan Hotel where Ned is captured – the towns that the Kelly gang raided – as well as several other locations including Stringybark Creek where the Kellys killed three officers, including Sergeant Kennedy. Here, Ned claims he was showing compassion given the Sergeant's mortal wounds.



Samuel Dundas. Photograph © Toni Wilkinson

*Ned Kelly* was commissioned by West Australian company Lost & Found Opera, who staged the production for Perth Festival in a heritage timber mill in Jarrahdale, a hour out of Perth. Driving there (I took a specially provided coach) is part of the experience, helping take you into the kind of rural world where the Kelly gang evaded capture.

The large concrete space with its corrugated roof, huge beams and open walls makes for an evocative playing area. A bank of seating has been constructed on one end, while the other end is open to the bush, which looms darkly during the performance until illuminated in the final scenes.

A chamber orchestra of 14 string, wind and percussion players from the West Australian Symphony Orchestra sit to the right of the playing area, while two folk musicians share the stage with a community choir of around two dozen. Six opera singers play close to 20 characters, all of them taking on several roles except Dundas who plays Ned.



Fiona Campbell and the community  
chorus. Photograph © Toni Wilkinson

Director Janice Muller, production designer Charles Davis and lighting designer Alastair Swanson use the space extremely well, keeping the short scenes flowing smoothly as cast members help each make quick costume changes on the left hand side of the stage.

The opera begins with mezzo soprano Fiona Campbell as Ned's mother Ellen Kelly standing centerstage and singing a version of the famous folksong *The Wild Colonial Boy*, reframed here by Goldsworthy as *The Wild Colonial Girl*, in which she sets the scene for the opera, telling the story of how Ned became a hero at age 11 when he saved a class mate from drowning in the raging creek. The song becomes a theme for Ellen, and is one of a couple of existing folk numbers used by Styles, along with some other folk tunes that he has written himself. The folk element adds a familiar melodic element from the era to sit against the darker, dissonant orchestral score, frequently driven by percussion, with influences of Britten and Berg. At times the percussion evokes the sounds of the bush, while the final scene is explosive musically as the sound of gun shots ring out. Conducted by Chris van Tuinen and splendidly played, it's clear that Styles has a strong musical voice.

The narrative is clearly told but the challenge is hearing some of the lively libretto. There are no surtitles (which you can understand in the heritage space) but it makes it difficult to follow some of what is being said. There is a fair amount of recitative, some of which feels rather flat, particularly when you can't understand it, and you find yourself straining hard to listen.



Fiona Campbell as Ellen Kelly.

Photograph © Toni Wilkinson

Given that it is such a famous story, the narrative could perhaps be less conventionally told. We don't feel that we are really taken inside Ned's head, or are being shown things from a different perspective to the one we know so well. A few more revealing arias might help. Themes such as disguise and shifting identity are introduced (including one inclusion of cross-dressing) but could also be further developed, along with the central theme of whether Ned was a hero, a victim or a cold-blooded murderer.

The cast do a terrific job. Dundas is excellent as Ned, his baritone conveying a range of colour and texture as he negotiates Ned's dark, rumbling music, and he brings a great deal of humanity to the role. His diction is also strong, though even he is occasionally hard to hear in the vast space. Campbell brings a great deal of warmth and vocal beauty to the role of Ellen, among others, and conveys Ellen's deep love for her son. "Die like a Kelly, my darling boy," she sings in heartfelt fashion at the end.

Adrian Tamburini's diction is excellent and his bass baritone has a rich, molten quality as Ned's friend Joe Byrne. There are also strong performances from tenor Matt Reuben James Ward as Ned's brother Dan, soprano Pia Harris as Ned's sister Kate and the Chinese peddler, and Robert Macfarlane as the cross-dressing Steve Hart.

While the opera leaves you mulling over aspects of its storytelling, there is still much to enjoy musically, performance-wise and in terms of its unusual, adventurous staging.