

The West Australian

ARTS | ARTS REVIEWS | MUSIC | MUSIC REVIEWS



CLASSICAL LIVE +

Kaleidoscope of colour in tribute to 'Connie'

Long-lost US singer-songwriter Elizabeth Converse bursts into life in Finding Connie at Callaway Auditorium on Sunday.

David Cusworth | The West Australian

Tue, 6 May 2025 8:56AM

Mirabilis Collective's Julia and Lucinda Nicholls with UWA Conservatorium of Music student, Charley Vukojevich, perform How Sad, How Lovely by Connie Converse.
Credit: Tallulah Chong

Mirabilis Collective and UWA friends honour Elizabeth Converse in Finding Connie at Callaway Auditorium

Long-lost US singer-songwriter Elizabeth Converse burst into life amid a kaleidoscope of tonal colour, lyrical brilliance and sliding-doors moments in Finding Connie at Callaway Auditorium on Sunday.

Female-focused Mirabilis Collective enlisted University of WA students to expand their musical palette, stretching the range and expression of soprano Lucinda Nicholls to inhabit the composer's chameleon-like personae across a mid-20th century spread of musical genres and poetry.

Lucinda, part of the Mirabilis core with mother Stephanie (artistic director, piano-oboe), sister Julia (arranger, violin-soprano), flautist Tresna Stampalia and cellist Elena Wittkuhn, led out a gentle jazz duet with classical guitar student Joscelyn Leahy.

Playboy of the Western World (arranged by Julia Nicholls) paired a hot-club finger-picking style with breezy vocals leaning into swing-era delivery and diction, far from the Greenwich Village folk scene of Connie's 1950s heyday.

Narration voiced by composer Candice Susnjar, spliced with original audio grabs, filled in the story.



Candice Susnjar narrates *Finding Connie* at UWA Callaway Auditorium on Sunday.

A college dropout and preacher's kid, "Connie" defied convention while exploiting its fruits, as in the biblically flavoured *I Have Considered The Lilies* (arr. Charley Vukojevich). Jazz piano and soprano opened a lavish verse to usher in violinist Siobhan Makison, violist Ariff Wan Fadzil Adlan, saxophonist Em Seymour and clarinetist Eva Tucker, sustaining a looping, playful vocal lead.

Self-taught and lonely, Connie's pioneering spirit might have danced to a stronger beat if blessed with such accompaniment in life.

Percussion (Katrina Soares) added another voice for *Honeybee* (arr. Amy Skellern), as pizzicato strings and clarinet laid down a sparse setting for Lucinda Nicholls in ballad style.

Fortune's Child (arr. Declan Turner), an enigmatic love song backed by lush strings with saxophone and flute, set the soprano soaring overhead in full-voiced folkloric mode to hang in the air on a haunting cadence.

John Brady (arr. Joonwoo Kim) added Kiki Wang on piano to a boisterous ensemble supporting cabaret-style vocals and a hint of ragtime in an oboe-

soprano duet full of irony and wit, closing in a brusque discord.

Close-contemporary Dylan Thomas featured in a setting of *In My Craft or Sullen Art* (arr. Declan Turner); Thomas having passed through New York in Connie's day before fame swept the Welsh bard to Britain and an early grave. Other-worldly tones from Lucinda Nicholls over mystery in clarinet, tuned percussion and cello spun out introspective musing on the muse of the era.

Coincidentally, Connie would quit New York in the late 1950s, just as Bob Dylan (who took his surname from Thomas) flipped the mood to protest. Who knows where a meeting of all three might have led?

A pastoral woodwind trio offered a lively backdrop to an offbeat EE Cummings lyric, *Anyone Lived in a Pretty How Town* (arr. Amy Skellern), quirkily voiced like a romantic ingenue as all carolled in concert to close



Soprano Lucinda Nicholls leads Mirabilis Collective in *Finding Connie* at UWA Callaway Auditorium on Sunday.

Vanity of Vanities again channeled biblical text to evoke a con artist in the American snake-oil tradition, with contemplative piano (Stephanie Nicholls) complementing the mystical meanderings of Connie's lyric and Lucinda Nicholls' stage persona.

Incommunicado built on that art-song base, with ambulant piano in agile chordal progressions enhanced by violin and piccolo lending a metaphysical depth to vocals worthy of a young Kate Bush.

One by One then dialled up darkness in mournful oboe, answered in a dreamy ballad over pizzicato violin and cello, blossoming into moody yearning for the morning sun.

Storm clouds began to gather in *Trouble* (arr. Charley Vukojevich), opening in a sweetly rhapsodic string trio with bowed percussion, morphing to country in a vocal trio of the Nicholls sisters with Vukojevich's alto, spiced by a sonorous cello solo.

More anguish followed in Joonwoo Kim's setting of *Talkin' Like You* (Two Tall Mountains), as Connie the writer and editor moved away from music. Rustling harmonics and restless piano with percussion called in a compelling Lucinda Nicholls lead, keening out existential angst before a sudden jump cut to Hollywood, country-and-western style, en route to a grand Broadway conclusion. Four seasons in one Doris Day tribute.

But Connie's story had no grand finale. One day she packed her bags and drove away, physically disappearing yet leaving behind a trail of intrigue.



Flowers for soprano Lucinda Nicholls in Finding Connie at UWA Callaway Auditorium on Sunday.

In a bookend to the opening number, the two sopranos joined Vukojevich (alto and ukelele) for How Sad, How Lovely (arr. Julia Nicholls), its gentle jazz harmonies channeling the Andrews Sisters in reflective mood, closing a cappella in a pin-drop moment.

A long ovation featured all arrangers and performers together on stage, with flowers for the diva.