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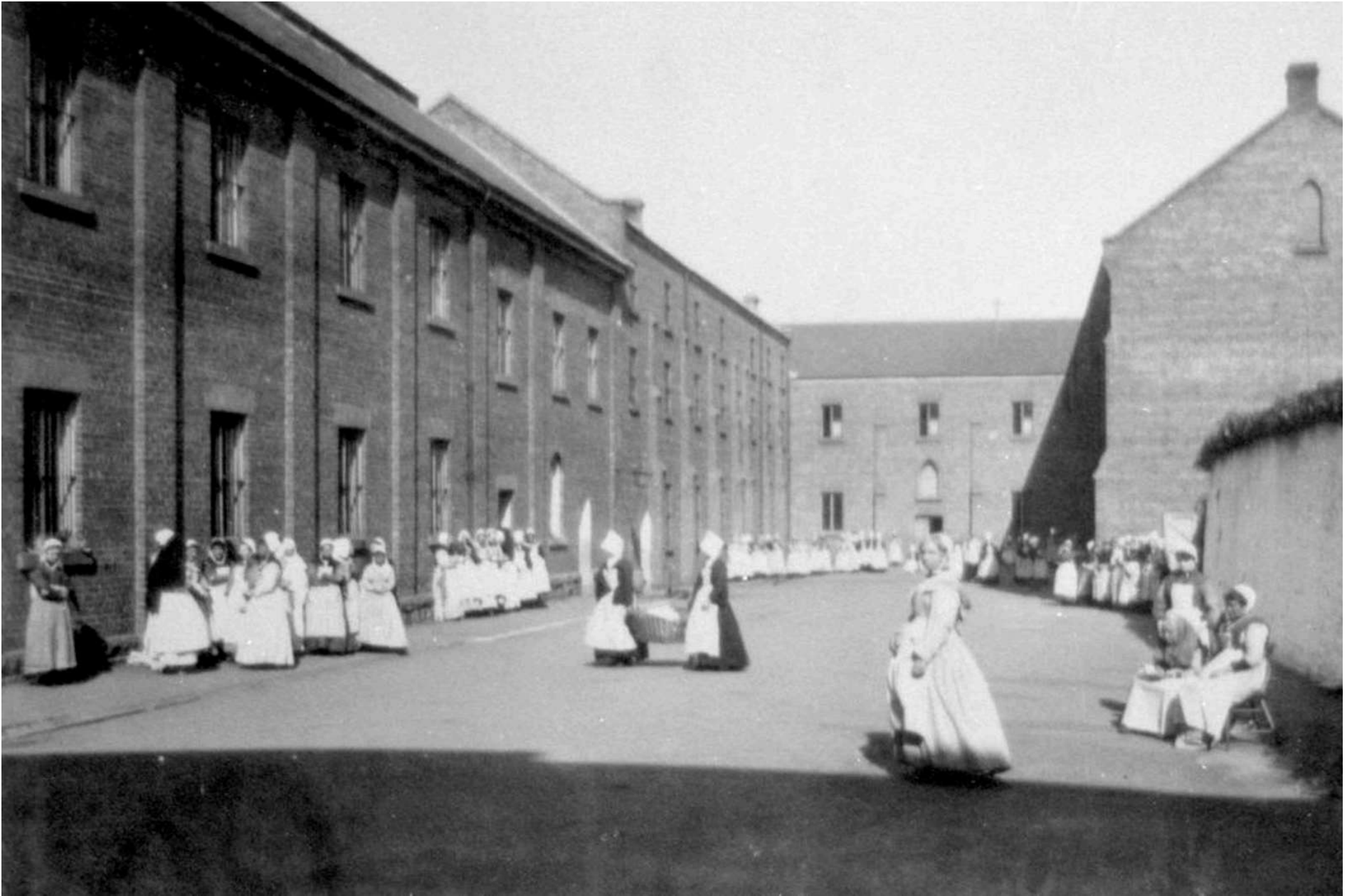
## Are the ghosts of this convent about to be heard?

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A concert at Abbotsford Convent pairs the poetry of Nam Le with the ‘electric’ sounds of Australia’s finest young musicians.

By Anna Goldsworthy

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**T**oday, the Abbotsford Convent seems like a utopian village. Children somersault on the lawns, artists labour in their studios, the sounds of Australian National Academy of Music performers practising spill out of the windows as the lowing of farm

animals drifts in from the Collingwood Children's Farm next door. My [memories of the convent](#) are halcyon, comprising visits to the children's farm with my sons for vicarious first sightings of [goats, cows and guinea pigs](#), and coffee-fuelled broadcasts from the 3MBS studios with my chamber music trio, Seraphim, alongside a wall inscribed with messages from friends, colleagues and, cringingly, our former selves. But these are brief, touristic impressions.

Writer Nam Le, who occupied an artist's studio here for a decade, remembers:

*My studio was C2.46, on the second floor of the convent building, in its eastern (unofficial) "Writer's Wing". I often worked late – and was there alone after dark, visited only by the Wilson Security team. (It helped that I lived seven minutes' walk away.) During that time I felt intensely connected to the sisters, novices and postulants who had lived there since the mid-1800s. I sensed traces of their lives. And I felt intensely curious about these lives, the situations that had brought them there.*

*After a bit of digging, I found my interest expanding to the history of the convent and the land on which it stands. This is land that is enormously significant to the Kulin Nation, whose connection to it extends back millennia. And it's also significant to the history of Melbourne, and the establishment of Victoria as a separate colony. It's a charged locus of church and state, a dense repository of heritage. And its incarnations over time – including as a convent, Magdalene asylum, farm, laundry, university, and (hard-fought-for) community space – exist simultaneously in that space, and give off compelling, even ghostly, energies.*



Nam Le, centre, with ANAM musicians Lili Stephens and Timothy O'Malley. SIMON SCHLUTER

Any inhabited land is a palimpsest of human experience; but on this patch, as Nam suggests, stories are inscribed with a particular density. The longest and most significant of these is that of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation, for whom Yarra Bend was an important meeting place and a traditional burial ground. Following European settlement, the Collins Street Baptist Church opened

the Merri Creek Aboriginal School near Dights Falls, to cater for their children, but the Wurundjeri people were soon driven from the land, and the school closed six years later.

Another chapter began with the arrival in Victoria of four Irish women from France in 1863, who purchased land for the convent and set about establishing a Magdalene asylum for the rehabilitation of penitents, or “fallen women”, whose transgressions ranged from insulting behaviour to “being out at night with boys” to prostitution. Before long, the convent expanded to include an industrial school for neglected girls, a reformatory for “criminal” girls, as well as an orphanage and day school.

At its peak, in 1901, the Convent of the Good Shepherd was the largest charitable institution in the southern hemisphere, housing more than a thousand inmates, and boasting vegetable gardens, a poultry farm, a dairy and piggery, alongside a successful laundry business that supplied linen to some of Melbourne’s finest establishments, including the Windsor Hotel.

For some women, the convent represented safe harbour and companionship, but for many others – as testified by shocking submissions to parliament – it was a site of trauma and abuse. Upon admittance to the Magdalene asylum, women were stripped of their birth names and issued with the name of a saint alongside a uniform. It was a literal process of whitewashing: not only of laundry, but of self. (Small wonder such ghosts return to trouble a poet working late on the second floor.) Residents were prohibited from leaving the grounds unsupervised, and worked punishing shifts in the laundries, in which accidents with the mangle were not uncommon. But business thrived. As journalist Alan Gill recalled, “bad girls do the best sheets”.



The Sacred Heart class of 1889.

Over the 20th century, the convent mutated further to incorporate a youth training centre and a cooking and typing school, until it was sold and then taken over by La Trobe University. A developer's plans for an apartment block and golf course prompted the formation of the Abbotsford Convent Coalition in 1997, which fought successfully for the multi-arts precinct we know today.





Writer Anna Goldsworthy: “There is no single version of the convent’s history, but a clamorous polyphony.” ALEX FRAYNE

Social history tours are now offered monthly, addressing the convent’s “dense repository of heritage”, while the Sisters of the Good Shepherd have faced their own reckoning. In 2018, they unveiled a memorial in the chapel’s garden, comprising a steel cylinder engraved with words nominated by former residents: shame, courage, fear, dreams, friendship, forgotten, anger.

Of course there is no single version of the convent's history, but a clamorous polyphony, which since 2020 has incorporated the young musicians of the Australian National Academy of Music (ANAM), based at the convent as they await the refurbishment of the South Melbourne Town Hall. Finnish pianist Paavali Jumppanen, the academy's artistic director, stepped into the role in 2021 with a commitment to engage the musicians with community, and for the convent to be a "laboratory" of new ways to make music. He notes the site's "troubled history", and seeks to "make music here in ... a relevant way, and in a way that is connected to the place".

When Jumppanen asked me to devise a musical response to the location, I approached Nam Le, who over recent years has articulated a poetic geography of Melbourne from Altona to Collingwood, and asked him to create a poem drawing on his own experience of the convent. The result was the startling and powerful *Abbotsford II* in the form of a "mangled sestina". Le describes it as a poem "that evokes some of these ghosts – through the personal prism of my time there".





Girls playing in the Abbotsford Convent yard before school circa 1970.

The sestina is a rigorously challenging form, whose demands themselves speak of labour – one of the poem's themes – and whose end-word repetitions evoke the resonances of history. Le's subversion of these strictures recalls the notorious mangler of the

Magdalene laundries and – perhaps – the distortions of memory, as he asks: *How to commemorate/the hidden lives, the pain, the silences that remain?*

This year, Le presented the poem to ANAM's entire cohort of young musicians. These are 65 of Australia's most exceptional young players, but not all of them are students of poetry, and I was unsure how this would land. Their responses were electric. Over the course of the ensuing workshop, a kaleidoscopic playlist emerged, responding to the poem's themes of labour, childhood, faith and trauma, drawn from the internalised music libraries the musicians carried within them. Afterwards, Le and I worked with a smaller curatorial team – Timothy O'Malley, Tom Allen and Shelby MacRae – to winnow these suggestions into an immersive program.

The result is a true act of co-creation: a collaboration across art forms and generations, incorporating improvisation, the spoken word, and repertoire from a span of more than a thousand years, ranging from Hildegard von Bingen to Australian composer Kate Moore. The ANAM musicians' own experience of this environment becomes a resonating chamber around Le's response, picking up some of the reverberations – and silences – of this charged site.

***Ghosts Of The Convent* concert is at Abbotsford Convent on August 22 at 7pm. Anna Goldsworthy, Nam Le and ANAM musicians will be in conversation on August 21 at 3pm. Anna Goldsworthy takes on the role of ANAM artistic director in January 2027.**

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