

Danielle O’Keefe

Founder and Artistic Director of The House That Dan Built



Danielle O’Keefe is a conductor, musical director, theatre maker and collaborator whose practice brings people together through voice. With more than 20 years of experience in the arts, she creates work with young people and women, connecting choral music, performance and storytelling. Her career began as a performer and vocalist before developing into artistic leadership, with a particular focus on youth arts and community participation.

Danielle founded The House That Dan Built in 2015, establishing a not-for-profit organisation and an ensemble of teenage girls and women. The company creates performances and large-scale choral installations that bring different generations into a shared creative process. Through this work, Danielle has collaborated with artists including Angelica Mesiti, Adena Jacobs and Daryl Wallis, and with Sydney Chamber Opera. The House’s original production *Tender Young Creatures* enjoyed three sold-out seasons in Sydney.

She is the creator and conductor of Toy Choir, established in 2014. Combining young voices, original songs and ukulele, the program gives girls opportunities to express their ideas and experiences through music. Performance highlights include opening the 2016 Mardi Gras with Paul Capsis, appearances at Sydney Festival and television performances, alongside collaborations with Force Majeure and Shaun Parker and Company.

After completing her studies in London in 2003, Danielle returned to Sydney to conduct the Australian Youth Choir. She subsequently served as Artistic Director of Outback Theatre for Young People, developing festivals and performance projects with regional communities in New South Wales. Her work has also involved the Australian Theatre for Young People, the Australian Institute of Performing Arts, St Martins, Zen Zen Zo and Meredith Monk.

Danielle was Musical Director of *The Bacchae*, directed by Adena Jacobs, for Melbourne Festival and Dark Mofo. She has directed mainstage productions at the Seymour Centre, The Joan Sutherland Performing Arts Centre and Merrigong Theatre. Across her practice, she combines artistic leadership with a commitment to creating ambitious work through collaboration.

Biography adapted from Danielle’s supplied CV.

Aura Parker

Author and illustrator of Bowerbird Blues



Aura Parker is an Australian author, illustrator and designer who creates picture books that invite children to look closely, imagine freely and explore the natural world. Working across words and images, she brings a playful sense of humour and intricate visual detail to stories about nature, childhood and connection.

Her picture book *Bowerbird Blues*, published by Scholastic Australia in 2023, follows a bowerbird searching for blue treasures and discovering a connection beyond his collection. Moving through sea, sky and city, the story combines the bird's fascination with colour with themes of longing and belonging. It was selected for the Australian Library and Information Association's National Simultaneous Storytime in 2024.

For the official Storytime event, Aura read *Bowerbird Blues* at Sydney's Green Square Library, with more than two million participants joining across Australia through libraries, schools, preschools, childcare centres, homes and bookshops. The event brought her storytelling and illustrations to a national audience of children and families.

Aura illustrates using watercolour, pen and coloured pencil, combining traditional drawing and painting with digital techniques. Her images are filled with patterns, colour and small details that reward repeated reading. She works from a studio in Sydney and has a background in design, with a practice that also encompasses prints, paintings and handcrafted textiles.

Her books include *Twig*, her first picture book as both writer and illustrator, and *Bowerbird Brood*, the follow-up to *Bowerbird Blues*. Her picture books have received recognition including Children's Book Council of Australia Notable selections and the Speech Pathology Book of the Year awards.

Aura's creative practice is closely connected to her interest in children's literacy and the environment. She encourages young readers to be curious about nature and to develop confidence in their own creativity.

Sources: Scholastic Australia; Sydney Writers' Festival; City of Sydney; Simon & Schuster; Writing NSW.

James Pensini

Head of Orchestral Training and Artistic Programming at Sydney Youth Orchestras

James Pensini is an Australian conductor and music educator who leads orchestral training and artistic programming at Sydney Youth Orchestras. He also heads music performance from primary to secondary school at Santa Sabina College. His career spans youth orchestras, school music programs, instrumental teaching and professional development for conductors.

James trained in trumpet and conducting at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music. His performing experience includes principal trumpet roles with the Sydney Youth Orchestra and Australian Youth Orchestra, as well as work with the Sydney Symphony Training Orchestra and Australian Youth All-Star Big Band. These ensembles took him to Europe and the Monterey Jazz Festival.

At SYO, James founded the Western Sydney Youth Orchestra and conducts the Peter Seymour Orchestra. He supports Chief Conductor Stanley Dodds in work with the Sydney Youth Orchestra. His Sydney Festival credits include Encounter in 2020 and A Taste of Spain in 2025, connecting orchestral performance with dance and other art forms.

James has guided more than fifty tours within Australia and overseas, working with young musicians in regional communities and major international venues. His professional activities also include adjudication, guest conducting, workshops and mentoring.

In his submission to Australia's National Cultural Policy consultation, James described more than twenty years of teaching across public, private and Catholic education, from primary school through to tertiary institutions. He identified access to instrumental learning as a central concern: many young Australians have little opportunity to begin learning an instrument. This focus on participation informs his contribution to youth music education and the development of opportunities for emerging musicians.

Sources: Sydney Youth Orchestras artist biography and management listing; James Pensini's National Cultural Policy submission.