

OBITUARIES

Readers are invited to submit obituaries of 330 or 750 words, which should include dates of birth and death. Send a disk or hard copy to The Age Obituaries, PO Box 257, Melbourne, 3001. Email lifeandtimes@theage.com.au

Impressive link with old Vienna

ERIC GROSS, AM
COMPOSER, ACADEMIC, PIANIST
16-9-1926 – 17-4-2011

By ROB STOVE

ERIC Gross, an influential teacher to several generations of Australian musicians and a composer who was one of the last musical links with pre-war central Europe, has died at his home in the Sydney suburb of Drummoyne. He was 84.

Gross arrived in Sydney in 1958 and initially taught at the NSW Conservatorium of Music before joining Sydney University's music department in 1960. He retired in 1991 as associate professor of music, but continued as an honorary research associate.

He combined his lecturing posts with substantial composition for film (Film Australia) and television (Screen Gems Columbia) as well as the concert hall and the ABC.

His idiom tended to frequent abrasive wit, with hints of Prokofiev and Darius Milhaud in its freedom from maudlin excess.

His mastery also resulted in roles as a conductor, and at various times he led Sydney University's Pro Musica Society, St Andrew's Cathedral Choral Society, the ABC's Sinfonia, and the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, among others. He was also invited to be an examiner at various other universities.

Of mixed Austrian-Czech Jewish background, Gross was born in Vienna, fled Austria after the 1938 Anschluss and spent most of the next decade in England and Scotland.

He was a student at Trinity College of Music in London before

gaining an MA from Aberdeen University in 1957. There, he acquired his dramaturgical flair and preoccupation with craftsmanship from his main teacher, Reginald Barrett-Ayres.

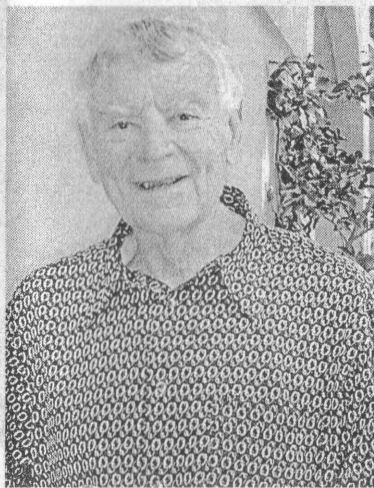
Gross, who had played jazz in his early years, then earned a living as a pianist in dance bands, at night-clubs, and occasionally on BBC radio, before landing in Colombo, where he continued his (light music) pianism from 1950 to 1954. He made several appearances on the national broadcaster, Radio Ceylon, then a popular station across southern Asia with its English language broadcasts.

Once at Sydney University, the short and stocky Gross, who often dressed with no idea of sartorial sense, made his mark with his broad smile. He no more pulled rank than pulled teeth. But once he spoke, with his calm, friendly bass-baritone that retained a certain Old Vienna foreignness, his scholarship became clear.

Devoid of conceit, he eschewed all egalitarian backslapping. What he said warranted full attention, so students — even casual ones — always benefited from it. When he spoke, audiences listened.

Music for the theatre featured repeatedly in the list of works he composed in Australia. This included a one-act opera, *The Amorous Judge* (1965), and a score to accompany a Sydney production of Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* (1975).

Typical of Gross was the way in which this last work both saluted and subverted his Viennese heritage. It included, after all, a setting of "Hark, hark, the lark", words that Schubert employed for one of his



most admired Lieder. He wrote the leading role in *The Amorous Judge* especially for the Australian bass-baritone Alan Light.

As with several others whose first language has not been English, Gross brought to the setting of English words a nuance that is beyond many a cradle Anglophone musician.

Occasionally he tackled choral writing, as with the 1966 cantata that he based on Pope John XXIII's encyclical *Pacem in Terris*.

A specialist in the late-18th-century pianist-composer F. X. Dussek, Gross arranged some of the latter's piano miniatures to form three orchestral suites, fittingly titled *Dussekiana I-III*.

With another orchestral essay, *Na Shledanou v Praze (Goodbye in Prague)* from 1976, he quoted the 19th-century Czech national anthem. The work premiered in Olomouc (a city in Moravia, in the east of the Czech Republic) and was

a characteristic gesture of quiet yet firm defiance to the Soviet occupiers of Czechoslovakia at the time.

Gross's list of opus numbers eventually arrived at an amazing 312. His work included two symphonies, a piano concerto, two mandolin concerti, an oboe concerto (*Goodbye in Prague*).

He even inspired music from colleagues — when he retired, 22 fellow composers produced pieces in his honour.

One of his most notable composition students, Matthew Hindson, wrote: "I remember Eric's astonishing command of technique. He was also not shy to put the boot in to his students when they were not seen as pulling their weight."

One 1967 musical textbook rather patronisingly said of Gross: "[He] does not write music that asks to be judged by the highest standards of musical originality or significance. His music has fluency, resourcefulness and a professional knowledge of possibilities." More than that, it bespeaks a man who could never for a moment stop being civilised.

Gross was also president of the Fellowship of Australian Composers, and for 13 years (1981-94) served on the board of the Asian Composers' League. In 1989 he was visiting professor at Guyana University.

Gross was awarded an Order of Australia in 1998 for his services to music.

His wife, Pamela, predeceased him by six days.

Robert Stove was an undergraduate at Sydney University's music department during the early 1980s. With additional material by *The Saturday Age*.