

Brink Monsters

for sinfonietta

I. *yowie*

II. *yara-ma-yha-who*

III. *bunyip*

On the face of it, *Brink Monsters* is about, well, monsters. Arguably all cultures have stories about cryptids, creatures, who, despite the dearth of tangible evidence they exist, live very active lives in people's minds. Australian society – both old and new – is no exception. From that continent's indigenous roots has sprung a cavalcade of strange, wondrous and often dangerous beings, several of which were reborn in the imaginations of later settlers.

One of these is the yowie, a hairy, ape-like creature, not so conceptually distant from the yeti, big foot or sasquatch. Accounts differ as to its nature – some say it's shy, others aggressive – but all agree it avoids the company of *Homo sapiens*. In the 1970s, a AU\$200, 000 reward was offered for its capture, to no avail; in any case, there are claims of sightings up to the present day.

The yara-ma-yha-who has had less impact in contemporary times, but perhaps this has allowed its wonderfully bizarre nature to remain intact. A reddish, frog-like vampire, it awaits its human victims in the branches of fig trees, striking when they least expect. It then sucks out their blood, swallows them, maybe drinks some water and has a power nap. On waking, the prey is regurgitated, albeit a little bit smaller and a little bit redder than before. This process is repeated again and again, sometimes until the victims themselves become yara-ma-yha-whos.

The final cryptid presented here is certainly the most infamous, not least because of its reputation with European settlers during the 19th century. A frightening creature, the bunyip inhabits moderately sized bodies of water called billabongs, haunting them with a bone-chilling cry. Its appearance has attracted much speculation: many say it's like a seal or dog, some report an elongated body with a small head, while others describe a hideous chimera made up of all sorts of animal parts. Its behaviour too is a mystery, with accounts of human killings, supernatural powers and even abduction of women for wifely ends.

Beyond their fantastical allure, these creatures say something about us, about our capacity to invent what we want – or don't want – to see. I cannot help but feel sorry for cryptids, imaginary though they may be: inevitably repulsive, ominous and scary, their physical and psychological make-up is so much at the mercy of our fears. And who has not projected similar horrors onto other human beings, effectively erasing who they are? Perhaps this is what *Brink Monsters* is really about, the essential unknowability of other people, and of ourselves.

Putting aside speculation about the about, I certainly know what the piece is *for*. *Brink Monsters* is dedicated to the memory of Lee Hyla, a great composer, talented teacher and lovely human being. When I was living in the US and things weren't so dandy, he provided me with quiet, selfless support, expecting nothing in return. This piece is certainly not about Lee – I can't think of anyone further from a monster – but I do hope there is something of him in its energy, its ambition and its ready embracing of the high, the low and the in-between.