



# Robin Toan

Her genre-fusing works have earned composer Robin Toan much acclaim; now they've brought her the OE of a lifetime

STORY LORNA THORNER PHOTOGRAPH JESSIE CASSON

Anyone who considers classical music the domain of the old-fashioned should have a listen to Robin Toan's electrifying ensembles. Far from sounding like something from a long-gone era when popular musicians sported white wigs and breeches, they're a fusion of classical and contemporary; combining the majesty of the orchestra with pop, jazz and a dash of rock 'n' roll.

"My pieces are melody based so they're pretty accessible," explains Robin, who's inspired by favourite stories and poems, and distinctive land and cityscapes such as Spanish architect Antoni Gaudí's fairytale castles and monuments around Barcelona. "But I don't want to be one of those composers people hear and go, 'Oh that's so-and-so'. I like to do something different each time."

Robin, 23, has just completed a Master's degree at the Wellington-based New Zealand School of Music and is looking forward to seeing how her work evolves when she heads to Europe shortly on a seven-month pilgrimage. Based in London and then Berlin, she'll be learning from some of the continent's top tutors and cramming as many music festivals into study breaks as her eardrums can possibly withstand.

It's the OE every young musician would die for, and comes courtesy of the \$20,000 Robin received when she won the Creative New Zealand-administered Edwin Carr Foundation Scholarship last November. It's a new award designed to help talented young composers kick-start their careers and, for Robin, that means soaking up as much new music as possible.

"There are only so many new music gigs in New Zealand, so it'll be great to see what young composers in Europe are coming up with."

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Robin first gained an appreciation of classical music through her dad's impressive CD collection, but it was at 14 that she discovered what really excited her. Her school music class was shown a compositional software program – much like a musical word processor. For Robin, it was love at first electronically produced note.

She persuaded her dad to buy her the programme and, from then on, devoted an "embarrassing" amount of time to creating increasingly sophisticated, genre-straddling compositions in her computer room at home.

Her musical career has been carefully plotted from the start. At 16, she began entering competitions in the hope that winning would raise her profile and, so far, her master plan has worked a treat. In the past year alone she's won the NZSO/Todd Corporation Young Composer Competition, the ADAM International Young Composers' Competition, the APRA Professional Development Award (for which she netted \$10,000) and become the National Youth Orchestra's first-ever composer-in-residence.

Then there was the trip to Paris the New Zealand/France Friendship Fund sent her on last December to attend the world premiere of her "dark and tormented" work *Dans la Nuit*. Robin's initial trepidation soon gave way to what must be every composer's definition of happiness – hearing his or her work come alive for the first time to a spellbound audience.

Other highlights include creating pieces for the Auckland Philharmonia and writing the soundtrack to a short film entitled *Loose Ends*, which premiered at the Auckland International Film Festival last year. But, right now, Robin is focusing on her imminent European adventure and surprisingly, her iPod's more likely to be blaring Britney Spears than Beethoven on the flight over.

"I'm surrounded by classical music all day, so in my down time I listen to pop," she says. "It's like aural candy – perfect for zoning out to." ☐

