Brett Dean began his musical career as a violist who from 1984 through 2000 was a member of the Berlin Philharmonic. Trained in viola performance at the Queensland Conservatorium of Music, from which he graduated in 1982, he started composing in earnest in 1988, producing experimental scores for film and radio. Within not many years he achieved a marked success in the concert hall with his clarinet concerto Ariel’s Dream, dedicated to Ariel Glaser, an American girl who died of AIDS at the age of seven and whose mother, suffering from the same disease, became a revered AIDS advocate; the work was premiered in 1995 with the composer’s brother, Paul Dean, as soloist. Ariel’s Dream proved a critical breakthrough, earning Dean an award from the UNESCO International Rostrum of Composers. Dance audiences became acquainted with him through his score (for solo cello and tape) for One of a Kind, a ballet choreographed by Jiří Kylián for the Nederlands Dans Theater in 1998 and much performed since then. He created numerous sound installations, including the work titled hundreds and thousands (for five-track tape), commissioned for millennium celebrations at the Berlin Kulturforum.

Dean leapt to a new plateau of international attention when he received the 2009 Grawemeyer Award for Music Composition, recognizing The Lost Art of Letter Writing, a four-movement violin concerto in which the solo violin plays the roles of the writers and recipients of letters penned in the 19th century by the Viennese composers Johannes Brahms and Hugo Wolf, the Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh, and the Australian outlaw Ned Kelly. In 2016 he was awarded the Don Banks Music Award by the Australia Council for his significant contributions to Australian musical life.

After leaving the Berlin Philharmonic in 2000, Dean remained active as a violist in concerts and chamber music, became an in-demand conductor, and served for several years as artistic director of the Australian National Academy of Music in Melbourne. He was creative chair at the Tonhalle-Orchester Zürich in 2017–18, and has been artist-in-residence with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, Swedish Chamber Orchestra, and Radio Symphony Orchestra Berlin (since 2017). He said:

It is sometimes quite a juggling of various tasks. Nevertheless, I think it all, particularly the performing I do in the course of the year, feeds into composing. I can’t imagine composing without being a performer or a performer without it leading to composing.

Dean has written two operas (Bliss, premiered in 2010, and Hamlet, unveiled at

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**In Short**

**Born:** October 23, 1961, in Brisbane, Australia  
**Resides:** in Melbourne, Australia, and Berlin, Germany  
**Work composed:** 2018 on commission from the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, Berlin Philharmonic, Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra, Minnesota Orchestra, and Amsterdam Cello Biennale; dedicated “For Alban in admiration”  
**World premiere:** August 22, 2018, at the Opera House in Sydney, Australia, by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, David Robertson, conductor, Alban Gerhardt, soloist  
**New York Philharmonic premiere:** these performances, which mark the New York Premiere  
**Estimated duration:** ca. 25 minutes
In the Composer’s Words

The concerto is in one uninterrupted movement but can be heard in five major sections:

I. Extremely intimate, yet flowing and playful
The solo cello — in its high register — starts a tentative dialogue with the orchestra through bird-call-like material. While introducing various motivic ideas that will feature throughout the piece, it picks up in density, rhythmic edge, and tempo. Unexpectedly however it dissipates into ...

II. Slow, dreamy, unhurried
An extended slow movement in which the soloist floats above gently undulating wave-like harmonies in harp and divided strings. At its peak, the orchestral colors are dominated by swirls coming from the two contrasting keyboard instruments, piano and Hammond organ. The solo cello takes us gradually down, down, down from its elevated, bird’s-eye-view into the new energy of ...

III. Allegro agitato sempre
In which the various rhythmic components that we’ve heard earlier return with a more demonic and threatening edge, forcing the soloist to “duck and weave” around the orchestra. This wakes the orchestra itself into more volatile actions of its own, in turn pushing the soloist into new territories of repeated down-bow chords and different colorings of the same note. The race comes to a sudden stop and everyone catches their breath for a moment but just when we think a calm may have returned we’re thrown into ...

IV. Fast, rhythmic, relentless
The soloist, now in lowest register, reluctantly takes off again; this cat-and-mouse chase with the orchestra isn’t done yet! At times the orchestra, having taken up the solo-cello’s motivic ideas as their own, then leaves the soloist behind, so keen are they to ride the wave, culminating in an extended orchestral tutti. After it subsides, the soloist returns, hushed, chastened perhaps by the orchestral storm he / she has set in motion. Shadows of former motives lead us to ...

V. Slow, spacious, and still
In the stillness, the soloist tentatively reconnects with the orchestra through a series of extended quarter-tone trills shared with other string soloists in cellos and basses. Calm, distant memories of the cello’s opening bird calls combine with delicate orchestral trills. The work ends with a hushed, upwards-spiraling question mark.

— Brett Dean
Glyndebourne in 2017), a good deal of chamber music for diverse ensembles, and a catalogue of orchestral music that includes a dozen pieces for soloist(s) and orchestra, among them concertos spotlighting violin, viola, and now cello. He said:

As a violist, writing for strings has always seemed like a “home” rather than an “away” game for me. It’s familiar ground but there are also dangers to avoid, such as knowing what will be difficult to play, which could either inhibit or over-excite! And most importantly I have to be careful that any knowledge of the vast string repertoire doesn’t limit my fantasy as a composer. From a viola perspective, the cello is a much bigger instrument in all senses, not only its dimensions but also the magnificent rich sound it can produce in most registers, which creates yet also concurrently quells a certain “violist’s envy”!

Dean rounded out the orchestration with a robust percussion section, including his first use of Hammond organ, which he says “responds to those sections of the piece with the jazz funk flavor.” In its review of the Berlin premiere, also with Gerhardt as soloist, Der Tagespiegel wrote:

The cello is embedded in a continuous impulsive soundstream, with the orchestra spiced up with the exotic instrumental colours of sandpaper and Hammond organ. The principle is tension and relaxation, with lyrical moments following in an instant upon those of heightened energy.

While acknowledging the potential for dramatic musical conflict inherent in the genre of the concerto, Dean finds that his Cello Concerto “is more concerned with collaboration than conflict, with ideas from the soloist being amplified by the orchestra.” Whereas he has given descriptive titles to many of his concerted works, he has done without one for this piece. He said:

I knew from the onset that this would be the purest of my concertos, focusing on the personality at the front of the orchestra, without any programmatic or spatial theatrics. ... The premise of the new work is concerned with music for music’s sake, so Cello Concerto, pure and simple, seems exactly the right title.

**Instrumentation:** three flutes (all doubling piccolo, one also doubling alto flute), three oboes (one doubling English horn), four clarinets (one doubling bass clarinet and one doubling contrabass clarinet), two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, eight suspended cymbals, bubble wrap, timpani, eight suspended cymbals, bubble wrap, tom-toms, vibraphone, tambourine, mark tree, two snare drums, tubular bells, marimba, tam-tam, woodblocks, sandpaper, sizzle cymbal, bass drum, tuned gongs, hi-hat, temple blocks, harp, piano, Hammond organ, and strings, in addition to the solo cello.