

# HARMONIOUS DEEDS

Great music takes us way beyond ordinary experience



Watkins plays Beethoven to his Afghani friends

Where fireworks fail, music succeeds. ABC Classic FM presenter Stephen Watkins discovered this a few years ago when he took some Afghani refugees, who had just been released from Woomera Detention Centre, to their first Australia Day celebrations.

Given the ordeals they had been through, not only in getting to Australia but while in Woomera, they found it difficult, despite their newfound freedom, to immediately feel much joy.

So Watkins took them back to his place and played them a Gregorian Chant, a form of music he later realised was familiar to them.

"They just sat there absolutely spellbound by the sound," he tells *limelight* over the phone from Adelaide. "It was a totally foreign environment, but the chant is like their traditional music. It resonates with the vocals. I've got a very good sound system, and I just turned it up to full volume and it swallowed them up."

Watkins, who presents *For*

*The God Who Sings*, the religious music show on ABC Classic FM, is a strong believer in the role of music.

"[Good] music speaks beyond the word," he says. "It touches the soul, it expresses something that can't be expressed in other ways. If you love music then you see ways of expressing things that are beyond the rational.

"Let's say a Beethoven sonata, for example, there is something that punctures the world beyond the common reality there. And Mozart – where did his genius come from? His gift was beyond the common craft.

"And Bach – he speaks of hope, which you don't always find in contemporary composers.

I like that. I like that hope, which is why I've always looked to Bach at the most desperate of times."

Does such a love of music naturally transform into a desire to help others in despair? "Some of it is given towards [helping others], and I guess some of us will try to find in our religion justification for that, and others will have music to do that.

"I guess in Bach's day they were also going through difficult times, and somehow or other his voice took people to somewhere beyond. I have a bit of a feel for that. Bach isn't introspective at all. He's saying, 'OK, let's deal with this and let's look beyond it'."

Watkins started playing the piano at the age of four. "My

parents were pretty religious. We used to have a Sunday school at our house. I think my father initially thought, 'Well, it's a good idea to get this boy around the piano as we're going to need someone to play piano for Sunday school.'

"It was the poetic expression in my life. It was something I could do well. As I matured I saw [the links to religion] much more strongly. I saw it as a way of expressing beyond the capacity of words. It became almost like a gift."

But various opportunities came his way, and he got into the managerial side of the performing arts before becoming a presenter for ABC Radio (where he has been for 37 years).

It suits him. "[Great music] is about expression of soul, about hope, about many of the things we deal with on a daily basis."

**Ruby Boukabou**

For *The God Who Sings*, Sundays, 10.30pm-12.30am, ABC Classic FM.