This is the author’s radio script of this article.
There have been many wonderful novels written about classical musicians. We have had Vikram Seth’s *An Equal Music*, Peter Goldsworthy’s *Maestro*, and more recently Jesse Pentecost’s bravura work, *The Con*. Now Sonia Orchard has added to the catalogue with her deeply moving first novel, *The Virtuoso*.

*The Virtuoso* is based on the life of Noël Mewton-Wood, an Australian concert pianist who made his name in London during the second world war as a teenage prodigy. Exceptionally brilliant, he was also mentally unstable, and his promiscuity in the days of official persecution of gays caused some awkward situations and undermined the admiration felt by the Australian public for their talented son. He committed suicide in 1953 at the age of 31.

Orchard has chosen not to write a straight biography, or a fictional autobiography, but has approached her subject more obliquely. Her narrator, highly unreliable in the best tradition of first-person protagonists, is a younger and less brilliant pianist, obsessed with the famous Mewton-Wood. There is a brief affair followed by years of self-delusion. The narrator – never named – gives up playing and becomes a music writer, and by the end of the novel, although still only in his twenties, is developing into somewhat of a pedant, though full of his own demons and troubled not only by memories of Noël but his own childhood as well. It is a beautiful piece of characterisation. The voice of this narrator, slightly prissy, melancholy and at times painfully naïve, rarely falters.
As well as Mewton-Wood, many of the characters in *The Virtuoso* are historical figures, including Benjamin Britten, Peter Pears, and Michael Tippett. English music broadcaster and critic John Amis was a close friend of Mewton-Wood and Orchard was able to interview him and others who have turned up as characters in the book. Each of them is vividly drawn, and seen not as the great figures of 20th century musical history some of them have become but as young people with their own faults and foibles. Orchard doesn’t quite make it clear where the fact ends and the fiction begins, but her access to personal archives has allowed her to stick pretty faithfully to the facts of Mewton-Wood’s life, and to quote from his letters, and the fact that John Amis launched the book for her in Sydney seems to bespeak approval of the contents.

*The Virtuoso* is not just a biographical novel. It engages with profound questions of the nature of genius, drawing not only on Mewton-Wood’s life but also the love story of Robert and Clara Schumann, in which the narrator, in his delusion, sees echoes of his relationship with his idol, and the tormented lives of Tchaikovsky and Beethoven in which he traces, perhaps more plausibly, the lineaments of Mewton-Wood’s troubled existence. And running through the book, with its echoes of musical forms and structures, is a soundtrack of the great works of the romantic piano repertoire - Tchaikovsky, Schubert, Schumann and Beethoven – vividly evoked and sending the reader back to listen again with heightened appreciation. *The Virtuoso* is a rich, powerful and complex novel.