

THE WINSTON CHURCHILL MEMORIAL TRUST OF AUSTRALIA

Report by - HELEN NOONAN - 2003 Churchill Fellow

Towards the development of three works of Lieder-opera.

"With reference to musical settings of Emily Dickinson poems and texts of Shakespeare and Dario Fo, to study how text informs the music and how music expands the text....developing new musical art works for solo voice that are more than lieder, not as grand as opera, but accessible to audiences of all three - ie of lieder, of the poet/playwright, of opera....to end up with additions to the repertoire of sung music unique in genre."

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Signed

Dated

Helen Noonan

29th December 2003

INDEX

Introduction.....	page 3
Executive Summary.....	page 4
Programme	
London	page 5
Italy	page 6
United States	page 7
Main Body.....	pages 8-10
Conclusions.....	page 11
Recommendations.....	page 12

INTRODUCTION

Departing Melbourne on September 9th 2003, I visited London (20 days); Milano and Genoa (10 days); Boston, Amherst and Lenox Massachusetts (10 days); Washington DC (4 days); New York (10 days).

I was on a mission. A mission to create!

(1) To develop three new music performance works, using Australian composers' settings of literary texts.

(2) To develop three new performance works that would break new ground in the music-drama format I have called "lieder-opera".

(3) To research and observe first-hand where my writers wrote: Shakespeare, Emily Dickinson and Dario Fo.

(4) To observe how text is expanded by music, how music is formed by text - the ways the human voice expresses, spoken and sung, the human experience

I returned to Melbourne on November 12th 2003 with a lifetime of possibilities. I feel as if I have only just begun the act of creation.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Project Description: Research and investigation towards the development of three new "lieder-opera" works - Australian composers' settings of texts by Shakespeare, Emily Dickinson, and Dario Fo.

Highlights: I met in person Australian composer Alison Bauld and worked with her on the completion of some of the musical settings of Shakespeare I had commissioned.
I met in person Dario Fo, Nobel Prize-winning Italian playwright.
I met and interviewed Professor Judith Farr, internationally respected expert, author and authority on Emily Dickinson.
I saw one of the first performances of Stephen Sondheim's brand-new work "Bounce", and learned more in one evening about the challenge of setting to music biographical material, than a year of lectures could have done.
I saw one of the most exquisite singers in the world Renee Fleming, performing to perfection as an actress as well, at the Metropolitan Opera in Zeffirelli's production of "La Traviata".
I unstintingly treated my aural and visual aesthetic senses to every experience I could find, watching and listening with the aim of my Fellowship as a guide.

Conclusion:

Two new works for public performance in 2004 will be the result of this Churchill Fellowship with a possible third in 2005/2006 through Melbourne's "Seduction Opera".

Creativity is not the domain of one particular culture or type of person. Humans are innately creative. Australian artists and musicians must be confident in their innate creativity and its value. Australian artists must develop and own Australian-ness as part of their artistry. Australian artists, because of geographical distance, have a special task to re-view, re-visit, re-interpret or uncover and unfold the arts of other cultures. Geographical distance, both inside and outside this country is an aesthetic of itself - potentially allowing Australian artists to witness and interpret and express from a unique perspective.

PROGRAMME

LONDON (8th to 26th September)

Several meetings with Alison Bauld, composer, the first on 10th September, then 12th, 18th. 22nd (reh/ record finished work), 23rd Alison Bauld lecture

- 12th Interview actress Joanna McCallum
Concert: National Portrait Gallery with Alison Bauld
- 13th - 14th Paris: Musee National du Moyen Age ("Lady and the Unicorn")
- 15th National Gallery
- 16th Globe Theatre: Richard III
- 17th "Jerry Springer the Opera"
- 18th Barbican: Simon Keenleyside in "Wintereisse" plus Trish Brown Dancers
- 19th Globe Theatre: Richard II
- 20th "Phantom of the Opera"
- 22nd ENO: "Cosi fan Tutte"
- 23rd Performed at Alison Bauld's lecture on music theatre at Cal-Polytech.
- 24th Comedy Theatre: "Midsummer Night's Dream"

Unable to organize a time with Simon Callow. Many attempts and using every avenue - in studio filming "The Phantom of the Opera".

Unable to line up Francesca Zambello and "Don Giovanni" - she suggested New York

ITALY

28th Milano Concert Orchestra Sinfonica e Coro Sinfonico di Milano
(Schonberg and Beethoven)

30th Sept to 7th Oct Genoa
1st and 2nd Teatro Carlo Felice, Genova
Rehearsals for "Viaggio a Reims" as observer
Meeting with Dario Fo

6th Vercelli Viotti Piano Competition

8th Milano: Piazzale Reale at the Duomo: Mostra "Guercino" (1600s)

Unable to achieve interview with Franca Rame (Partner and collaborator of Dario Fo) - Franca Rame said she would, then wouldn't, and she finally said she was too busy. Finally made contact with the agent of Fo and Rame to finalize agreement re "Una Donna Sola".

UNITED STATES

- 9th/10th Oct Boston, Mass
"Thoroughly Modern Milly"
(Hotel was next door to Wang Theatre!)
Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum
- 11th to 16th Amherst, Mass
Emily Dickinson Homestead
Amherst College Library (letters and poems)
"Evergreens" (Home of EDs brother)
- 14th Lenox, Mass
Shakespeare & Co, meeting Dave Demke, director
- 16th New York o/n Meeting Nancy Cato
- 28th to 31st Washington DC
28th "Bounce" Stephen Sondheim new work @ Kennedy Centre - dir
by Hal Prince
29th Meeting/interview with Professor Judith Farr
30th "La Casa Azul" @ Kennedy Centre dir. Robert le Page
Smithsonian
- 1st to 9th Nov New York, NY
1st "La Traviata" Metropolitan Opera (Renee Fleming)
"Golda's Balcony" Helen Hayes Theatre (Tovar Feldshuh)
- 2nd El Greco Exhibition at Metropolitan Museum
Algonquin Club (Kane Alexander in cabaret)
- 3rd Tisch Centre 92ndStreet Y: Book launch - Shirley Hazzard and
Jan Morris, authors
- 4th Frick Collection
"Movin' Out" Richard Rogers Theatre (Twyla Tharp
choreographer/director)
- 5th Guggenheim Museum (Rosenquist: A Retrospective)
New York Public Library (ED Research)
Birdland Jazz Club
**NOTIFIED OF AUSTRALIA COUNCIL PROJECT
FELLOWSHIP GRANT FOR "SHAKESPEARE SUNG"**
- 6th Performing Arts Library, Lincoln Centre (ED Research)
7th "Cabaret" Studio 54
New York Public Library (ED Research)

Unable to meet up with Marco Armiliato of Metropolitan Opera (not in town)
Unable to meet Francesca Zambello (did not get back to New York while I was
there)
Unable to meet with Julie Harris, actress (Emily Dickinson play) (Boston)
(JH not well)

MAIN BODY

The Fellowship was a journey of creation in that the creation of three performance projects was at its core.

In **London** I met composer Alison Bauld for the first time - the first time in person at least. I had "met" her through her work "Banquo's Buried" which I had first performed a few years before. I loved performing it because the music Alison Bauld had composed allowed for - demanded - a truly dramatic performance from the singer. Even though the accompaniment was written for piano only, it used texture, dynamics, rhythms, tonalities, to support and unfold the nuances of the character and meaning of the text. So it demanded of the singer in turn vocal and physical freedom to express the drama and dilemma of Lady Macbeth at that point in the play.

This work, "Banquo's Buried", helped me to crystallize my particular viewpoint on potentials for voice use and for the legitimate expression of drama through sung music. I have been promoting greater understanding of this approach through my own performing work and through my teaching and creating for many years. The three projects the Churchill Fellowship focusses on are the ways I will bring this understanding to the attention of the performing arts in Australia and, hopefully, to audiences wherever they may be.

One reason why Alison Bauld and I have so much in common in our approaches to dramatic sung music is that we both trained as actors first before turning to music. Alison graduated from NIDA, in Sydney I from the National Theatre Drama School in Melbourne.

I knew that Alison Bauld had written a setting of Cleopatra's death scene in response to another singer's request, and I commissioned Alison Bauld to write me two more. A selection of Portia from the "Merchant of Venice" ("I pray you tarry ...pause a day or two..."), and of Queen Margaret from "Henry VI Part 3" ("Hold, valiant Clifford..."). I was able to commission Alison because I have received financial assistance to do so from the Mietta Foundation of Melbourne and from Melbourne lawyer Sally Romanes. I also received some assistance from Peter Kollimer of Melbourne.

When I arrived in London, Alison had virtually completed Portia, and was well underway with the Queen Margaret work. It was at a stage where she could tailor it to me and my performance style. It has since been completed. It is stunning. It is ready to go.

A digression.

While on the Churchill travels, in New York, I received word from the Australia Council that they had awarded me a \$20,000 Project Fellowship Grant for the production of "Shakespeare Sung" - incorporating "Banquo's Buried", "Death of Cleopatra", Portia, and Queen Margaret. This program will premiere via Melbourne's "Seduction Opera" in June/July 2004. Watch for announcements. This is a Churchill Fellowship at work!!

It was the Shakespeare project that examined the drama aesthetic of my mission...the expansion of text by music and music by text - in particular for solo performance. And I wish to look at this with regard to other languages and contemporary writings. Hence my desire to adapt a work by Dario Fo and Franca Rame. The work I will adapt into libretto form is "Una Donna Sola", a one woman play. Melbourne composer Jane Hammond will be setting it.

This is a much more long term project. I will need quite a few months to edit the script. It will be mostly in Italian - a language I am fairly fluent in.

The time in **Italy**, while ultimately achieving the basics of what I wanted - ie permission from Dario Fo and Franca Rame to attempt this lieder-opera - was very frustrating. As I was waiting for the flight to Milano and my appointment with Franca Rame, I recieved an email saying she wished to cancel. Too busy. I emailed back and got another time, she cancelled that one as well.... I am still not sure what the problem really was. So I went to find Dario Fo in Genova and achieved the meeting I needed. I have permission to edit and adapt "Una Donna Sola".

But the meeting I wanted I did not achieve - this time. For I wanted to hear the creator of the character - Franca Rame - I wanted to hear her voice. The Italian language has so much music in it. And the character in "Una Donna Sola" is at various times a gigue, a tarantella, a moan, a laugh, a cadenza. Perfect for musical interpretation. But there is still work to do. Perhaps another trip to Italy and another attempt to interview the mysterious Franca Rame.

On to the **United States**.

I had loved the poetry of Emily Dickinson for a long time. And I had sung some of it in settings by American composer Aaron Copland. But I wanted again to unfold other poems, and other writings of this enigmatic woman. I wanted to expand meaning of her mysterious poetry using music to reach those hidden places of consciousness that her economic words hint at. To use music, this time not so much as a dramatically intense partner in theatre, but more as a way into subtle dimensions of emotion and meaning and awareness of her personal relationship with the infinite.

It was essential to see where this extraordinary woman lived. So I went to Amherst, Massachusetts. There is her house, her garden, the house of her brother and sister-in-law. In the library at Amherst College, there are letters and poems written in her own neat hand. I made a discovery that even Professor Judith Farr, the Dickinson expert, was surprised by...that one of the few poems published in her lifetime was published by the man she loved in vain, Samuel Bowles in his newspaper - on Valentine's Day 1865! And it was a poem about a snake in the grass! Seeing the little old town, her house, the size of her room and her writing desk - it is easy to see how or why messages are delivered surreptitiously in a town which could choke on gossip.

Having seen Amherst and having spoken with Judith Farr I also came to the clear understanding that not just Emily Dickinson's poetry is to be the subject of my performance work about her. It must also focus on her letters as well. Her written communications express passion and ecstasy and agony in a way

no ordinary letters would. They are operatic in dimensions of feeling. Both letters and poems are glorious out-pourings of human experience in a small town in the 1840s to 80s. Examinations and contemplations of nature, of death and immortality.

The interview with Judith Farr focussed my understanding of Emily Dickinson further. On to her passion for life, death, infinity, nature, love. Her eclectic interests within the confines of her narrow world. Her fun and gaiety. Her weird withdrawal from the world.

With assistance from the Myer Foundation I have commissioned four Melbourne composers to set poems and letters of Emily Dickinson. Further funding will be needed to get the performance work ready to present, but it is on its way. I would like to think it could even be ready by the end of 2004.

But all the other activities I undertook in London, in Italy, in the United States - Washington, New York, Boston - the galleries, the concerts, plays, musicals, operas - all somehow had a contributing focus to the purpose of the Churchill Fellowship. They may have been directly applicable or not. But I looked and listened with my projects in mind. And so I learned a lot.....

Simon Keenleyside singing "Wintereisse" with Trisha Brown dancers - unheard of - but it is an approach to "lieder-opera". Renee Fleming showing effortlessly that making a beautiful sound does not preclude dramatic perfection, in her case it aids it. Seeing how difficult it is to make an entertaining show when facing the requirements of biography - as in Stephen Sondheim's new work "Bounce". And if the genius of Stephen Sondheim could not make it work, who can. (I will be avoiding that with Emily Dickinson!). But then I look at Tovar Feldshuh being Golda Meier in "Golda's Balcony" and marvel at her versatility. A solo performer perhaps has a better opportunity to provide biography because of the focus on the solo performer. And the sound of her (speaking) voice was exquisite. Where the voice comes from inside her demonstrates such clarity of being and purity of presence. And the Shakespeare plays I saw. They were not new to me, I had seen them before in other productions. But the way each of them worked makes me marvel again at the dimensions attainable through Shakespeare. (My "Shakespeare Sung" will be such an affirmation of this). I was reminded how valuable is precision (the choreography of "Thoroughly Modern Milly" and "Cabaret" versus "Movin' Out"). I was reminded how vile shameless ego can be ("Movin' Out") when compared with integrity (authors Jan Morris, Shirley Hazzard).

And the visual arts have inspired me too. Lady Macbeth is immersed in Van Gogh's "Starry Night". Queen Margaret's passion is of the kaleidoscopic colours of Klimt's "The Kiss", Portia at that moment of her statement "I pray you tarry ...pause a day or two..." is as vulnerable as Picasso's "Girl with a Dove".

CONCLUSION

In the cavalcade of music and theatre and writing and painting and art works of every kind I saw and experienced through my Churchill Fellowship, I can only conclude that creativity is not the domain of one particular culture or type of person.

Humans are innately creative. I looked at the works of three wildly contrasting artists - Shakespeare, Emily Dickinson and Dario Fo, not to mention the hundreds of others I saw, read or listened to.

I conclude that Australian artists and musicians must be confident in their innate creativity and its value. Australian artists must develop and own Australian-ness as part of their artistry. Australian artists, because of geographical distance, have a special task to re-view, re-visit, and re-interpret, or uncover and unfold the arts of other cultures as well as their own.

For Australians, geographical distance, both inside and outside this country is an aesthetic of itself. Distance potentially allows Australian artists to witness and interpret and express from a unique perspective that includes travel, time, longing, glamour, homesickness, boredom, doubt, delight and ecstasy.

Two new works for public performance in 2004 will be the result of this Churchill Fellowship with a possible third in 2005/2006 through Melbourne's "Seduction Opera". The works will reflect distance (Australians interpreting other cultures) and connection (Australians creating from Australian consciousness).

RECOMMENDATIONS

I recommend that Australian artists travel. To the distant parts of Australia. To Asia. To Africa, America and Europe.

I recommend that Australian artists take time to study cultures other than the one they were born into, indigenous, European, Asian.....

I recommend to Australian artists that if they don't have a niche of artistry that sustains them aesthetically, to create one.

I recommend - undertake - to present "Shakespeare Sung" in Melbourne in June/July 2004.

I recommend - undertake - to present "Voicing Emily" by the end of 2004.

I recommend - undertake - to investigate further the possibility of the lieder-opera "Una Donna Sola".

I recommend that as many people as possible come to see "Shakespeare Sung" in 2004!

Thank you to the Churchill Trust for this life-changing experience.

Helen Noonan
30/12/03