

THE WINSTON CHURCHILL MEMORIAL TRUST

Churchill Fellowship 2003

Fellowship

The Dame Roma Mitchell Churchill Fellowship 2003 to further my career as a performer of contemporary opera by attending the annual New Op meeting - Netherlands, and to study with leading individuals in the field of opera – Italy, U.K.

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Signed: Dimity Shepherd Dated: 3rd February 2004

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This report details the findings from a 2003 Churchill Fellowship visit to England, Italy and the Netherlands where I studied with leading individuals in the field of opera. I then took part in New-Op 12, an international meeting of people involved in the creation of new works of opera and music theatre.

My report will be divided into three main sections

1. London - sessions with Robert Tear and Raymond Connell.
2. Florence - sessions with Franco Pagliuzzi.
3. Rotterdam - New-Op meeting.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Without the financial assistance of the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust and the generosity of the late Dame Roma Mitchell, who during her lifetime personally sponsored twelve “Dame Roma Mitchell Fellowships for the pursuit of excellence in the performing arts”, and after whom a perpetual fellowship is now awarded in her honour, my trip would not have been possible. It is not only a great responsibility and privilege to carry the title of Churchill Fellow, but also a great delight to see how highly regarded the Trust and its’ fellows are throughout the world.

I also wish to thank:

Robert Tear, whose gentle approach provided an environment where I could learn through “play” and who always demanded a true connection to the subject matter and text.

Raymond Connell, whose great technical knowledge and infectious desire to experiment and to be open to new findings brought out my most adventurous and courageous spirit.

Franco Pagliuzzi (Singing Guru extraordinaire), a man with gifted ears who always demanded the most honest sound production and who possesses the key to full bodied Italianate sound.

All at New-Op 12, a conference where I was exposed to a vast array of different, new music theatre, and where I met a professional "family" of people who strive to express themselves through sung music theatre.

To the many other people I met along the way who enriched my experience through their knowledge and generosity- Airdrie, Kathryn, Fiona, Sheena, Deni, Disa and Leonardo, Joachim, Helen and Jacob, Jenni, Claudio and family, and especially Gary, who unexpectedly proposed to me in Florence and brought a whole new level of wonder and joy to my fellowship experience.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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FELLOWSHIP OBJECTIVE

To study with leading individuals and organisations unavailable within Australia to enable my career as a performer of contemporary opera to continue to develop to the highest standard.

This includes attending the annual New-Op meeting, a world forum for people involved in the creation of new music theatre and opera, where as an ambassador for new Australian opera, I aim to take part in an exciting exchange of knowledge to use as a resource when collaborating on future Australian.

FELLOWSHIP HIGHLIGHTS

1. Coaching with Robert Tear on mezzo repertoire, including the complete role of Lucretia from The Rape of Lucretia by Benjamin Britten.
2. Technique lessons with Raymond Connell (London).
3. Viewing live opera, music theatre, recitals and exhibitions.
4. Technique lessons with Franco Pagliuzzi (Florence).
5. Attending New-Op 12 and meeting lots of composers, directors, producers and performers who are all passionately involved in the creation of new works, and building an international network of like-minded artists (Rotterdam).

FINDINGS:

- An immense wealth of new music theatre is being created out there and varies enormously in style and subject matter.
- The quality of new Australian works is comparable to the international standard.
- All Australian works I promoted at the New-Op meeting were extremely well received by the international community.
- The Australian works were uniquely Australian in flavour, reflecting our developing cultural identity as a nation.
- Many of the new works I observed were concerned with current world politics as subject matter, and that these works were more powerful for telling these relevant and crucial stories.
- The term “music theatre”, is so broad that it contains many different disciplines and schools of thought, some of which can be at odds with one another.
- Our isolation as a country results in our arts industry being impoverished compared to Europe, because in Australia it is impossible to financially sustain great numbers of new works due to the fact that touring within Australia necessitates huge travel with few cities to play in. In Europe the same show can travel small distances to play in many cities thus recovering costs.
- Seeing myself through the eyes of professionals overseas helped me to realise how my skills as a performer have developed and to gain some idea of how I compare in an international context. The lesson once again was our standard here in Australia is equal to the standard anywhere.
- To be a great singer you must be connected to the text at all times. You must be aware of what you are singing about and if playing a role, enter the character. This is essential, without it you can never be a complete artist. It also carries a responsibility to work hard at languages.
- To be a great singer you must be connected to your body at all times. As your body is your instrument, you have to understand it and feel very subtle

changes in it. It is important to recognise the Mind-Body relationship. To sing well, you have to look after yourself holistically so that you can be free to release the voice.

- I have consolidated and continued to develop my skills as a performer and interpreter of music.

Future implementation of knowledge-

- Application for grants to commission new works in the immediate future.
- Through delivering to the Australian public the highest standard of performances I am able.
- Through imparting the knowledge I've gained to aspiring singers through teaching.

PROGRAMME

London 28th Sept-24th Oct

- Coaching with Robert Tear
- Lessons with Raymond Connell.
- Attending opera, music theatre performances, art galleries.

Florence 25th Oct- 17th Nov.

- Lessons with Franco Pagliuzzi.
- Taking in the historic sites and art in Florence.

Rotterdam 20th Nov- 25th Nov.

- Attending New-Op conference.

INTRODUCTION

It is impossible to write the findings of my fellowship without it sounding to some degree personal, as the journey to become a good singer is by its nature a personal journey for each individual singer. The experience I had through my Churchill Fellowship was that I was able to harness my thoughts about what is required for me to be a good singer and what my goals as a singer are much more clearly as a result of my getting away from my usual environment and seeing myself within an international community of professionals.

I saw with clarity that there are three essential streams that must be developed if one is to become a good opera singer. One is to be dedicated to finding the truth in the text, subject and drama of what you are singing. The second is to become as technically efficient as is possible, through physical discipline. This may sound strict, but it really means being a bit like a “yogi”, knowing your body and mind so well that you can create the optimum conditions to sing at any time.

The third crucial thing I identified was that the most inspirational singing usually comes from singers who share a profound connection with what they are singing about. Taken to its’ most potent extreme, this means finding what stories you must tell as a human being and creating works that tell those stories. This is why I feel I must be involved in new works, so that I can tell contemporary stories of significance to my life, not just be involved in a museum art form. Much of the traditional repertoire does still have relevance to our lives today, but I feel we have new stories to tell as well that reflect our changing world. This is the role of art in society; to comment, define, discuss, enlighten us about the world we live in.

LONDON 28th Sept- 24th Oct

COACHING WITH ROBERT TEAR

“As a singer, I use songs to balance my life. No matter how old a song is, when I sing it, it should be contemporary for me, if I am to bring honesty in my rendering of it. Otherwise, it becomes a historical relic and is dead.” – Bernice Johnson Reagan, founding member - Sweet Honey in the Rock.

Robert Tear is a fine singer and interpreter who has been well-known in his career for his dramatic intensity. I wished to work with him because I admire him as a complete performer who immerses himself in his roles, and also because he has a career which includes both contemporary and traditional repertoire. I see this as the pattern that my own career has followed so far and to which I'm keen to continue.

The release of beautiful sound is wonderful, but without connection to the words it is a mere shadow of its potential. This is Robert's lesson. He demanded from me at every moment a genuine connection to text. He made me go back to speaking the libretto, and required that I knew what “action” I was playing on each line.

Together we worked extensively on the role of Lucretia from Benjamin Britten's The Rape of Lucretia. Robert has worked with Britten many times throughout his career and has sung his repertoire extensively, thus making him the ideal person to explore this fabulous role with.

He would query “what time of the day is it here?” and I would sing the same line imagining it at different times of the day. It's amazing how different the quality of voice can be if it variously sung as though it's dusk after a long hot day, or alternatively mid morning on a crisp cool day.

Robert helped me find the complexity in the role and showed me it's the hidden keys to a character that make them more interesting. With Lucretia, this meant discovering that this noble, chaste woman had desires outside her marriage for a man who would

ultimately become her rapist. Were you to play her solely as a good woman who is raped - that is tragic. But not nearly as tragic as a good woman who is not only raped, but who had always secretly desired her rapist. This is much richer.

Robert also taught me to question musical conventions. An example of this was our work on Cherubino from The Marriage of Figaro where he asked me to sing it exactly as written, which resulted in the pauses falling on notes differently to those we are used to hearing on recordings and in performance. Questioning whether these “habits” serve the character better than what Mozart actually wrote was an excellent exercise because I found they didn’t, and that the original score held more insight into the character of the adolescent boy Cherubino. Ultimately all musical choices have to be negotiated with each conductor, but I think it’s imperative that as singers we consider these things and arrive at a flexible point of view before rehearsal begins. Otherwise we are mere mimics and puppets, not artists.

With Cherubino, we began by finding the stance of the boy first, and I found that removing my feminine mannerisms brought a masculine quality to the voice. We also discussed *Non so piu* concerning a young boy “so bursting with new desires that if no one will *talk* of love to him, then he will just have to do so with himself”. If we think of “talk” being code for masturbation, it becomes much more interesting. This thought altered my breathing as I sang and suddenly the aria sprang to life.

Robert picked up that I have a tendency to come in slightly late and countered this by instructing me to always think of coming in early and that corrected it.

Robert told me that he felt I should forget about technique when I sing and just “be an artist”. He considered my technique to be sufficiently skilled that I shouldn’t spend so much time being preoccupied with it. It gave me great confidence that he approached me in this way, and it altered the way I viewed myself too. As singers we are lifelong students, but need at the moment of performance to feel that we are complete.

LESSONS WITH RAYMOND CONNELL

Raymond Connell is a young ex-pat Aussie currently making a name for himself in London as a voice teacher. His star is certainly on the rise, and we can be justly proud of this Australian's success in London. Raymond is a dynamic teacher who is constantly experimenting and finding new helpful answers for singers. I found my time with him hugely beneficial.

Raymond and I worked particularly on my upper "passagio", an area of my voice where I have struggled to gain consistency. He managed to fix a problem I'd had in this area in a difficult phrase in Cenerentola's "*non piu mesta*" in my first session with him, incredible considering I have battled this phrase for years. He made me crescendo through the phrase, which kept the breath moving, and colour the vowel darker as I moved into the passagio.

The passagio was an area I worked on with everyone during my fellowship. One week both Raymond and Robert Tear gave me the same exercise to improve it, which involved going up in semitones over the passagio with a German umlaut sound or a French "u" sound. It was exciting to see their advice complement one another so well.

Raymond also asked me to imagine that I had a hole at the base of the front of my neck where sound was dribbling out when I sang over the passagio. It sounds crazy, but it works.

We also focussed on keeping a nice, deep, open throat. He taught me that I often "concertina" my throat when making consonants, which negatively affects the sound. I now know how to keep it constantly open. Another useful exercise was to think of singing with an accent, this can produce fantastic results. So too did declaiming the lines in a Shakespearean fashion before singing. This produced a good legato line and consistency of body in tone.

Raymond's teaching involves a lot of body awareness. He discovered that I am often locked between my shoulder blades, so I worked at keeping this area "soft" as I sang and found a big improvement in the quality of sound. We also worked on things that my fantastic teacher in Melbourne, Anna Connolly had already worked on with me, such as keeping the neck elongated and soft, and the chest gently lifted.

Raymond also provided me with an exercise of rotating my ribs around my waist to loosen my belly wall, freeing a "held" breath.

All good teachers I've have worked with have had a strong energy to bring to the lessons. Raymond is himself a very vibrant person. I left every session with him on a high and with a feeling I could do anything. He saw me as a risk-taker, and therefore I behaved like one and found myself surpassing my usual standard and discovering the next level. He was inspirational in his belief that there were no limitations for me, and I thank him for that exciting gift.

LIVE PERFORMANCES AND EXHIBITIONS

In addition to everything I learned in the studio I saw many operas, music theatre, recitals and exhibitions. This was constantly informing my work from other perspectives.

I was particularly inspired and moved by an exhibition by Bill Viola called "The Passions" at the National Gallery. This artist uses digital flat panel screens that can be hung on the walls like paintings, and extreme slow motion film of people where the observer can see the flickering of emotion passing over the faces of the subjects. Not only was the art fascinating, but the pieces the artist used as examples of his inspiration which were also exhibited, and some of the text Viola chose to describe them. For instance, there was a traditional Japanese Noh mask, which seemed to change according to the projection of the observers thoughts. This reminded me of how the neutral face of the actor is the most powerful one, because it's on that which the audience can see whatever they choose. How important it is for us to learn as performers that less is more.

At the exhibition I wrote down the following, all of which felt relevant to my life as a performing artist and life in general-

“In whatever you do, you must burn yourself completely like a good bonfire, leaving no trace” - Shunryu Suzuki, founder San Francisco Zen centre.

When asked what he was, Buddah said “I am awake”.

The Sufi poet Rumi compares the inner development of human life to a bowl floating on a great ocean. Empty at first, over a lifetime it slowly fills with knowledge until it finally becomes full and sinks because it has become obsolete, and returns to its’ source.

“Fudo” is the wall of pain between your earthly persona and your perfected self, the gap between your abilities and your depth of feeling.

“Break down the front door if you want to enter your home” - Dogen. Sometimes violent action is necessary, but the line between purification and annihilation is razor thin.

John Currin’s exhibition, held at the Serpentine Gallery was fantastic. His distorted and exaggerated figures are an excellent lesson for any actor.

Live performances help to teach you what works on stage, what vocal projection carries, and broadens knowledge of repertoire. At Covent Garden I saw Orlando, Boris Gudanov, Madama Butterfly and a Cecilia Bartoli recital. Hearing new voices live teaches me so much about singing. Olga Borodina (Boris Gudanov) was a highlight. Her rich mezzo was everything I had hoped for from recordings. Sadly Cecilia Bartoli was not so thrilling. She still has the fastest coloratura around, but the voice live was extremely small and not as beautiful as I’d expected. The Orlando cast

was fantastic, particularly soprano Camilla Tilla and mezzo Alice Coote. Li Ping Zang was a wonderful Butterfly.

“Jerry Springer-The Opera” was something quite different. I was curious to see it as it’s been the most successful contemporary opera of recent years. Whilst I enjoyed it for a while, I thought it would have achieved the same result had it been half as long. “Operatically”-sung swearwords clearly put bums on seats, but I’m not sure it’s art.

ITALY, 25th Oct- 17th Nov.

LESSONS WITH FRANCO PAGLIAZZI

I have worked with Franco Pagliuzzi twice before on previous trips to Italy. He is a legend. It was a delight to work with him again, although I'd ideally like two years with him, not just three weeks.

Franco's technique is based on remaining natural and relaxed so that the voice can be free and full. This may sound simple, but it is a life's work to learn to be truly centred in oneself. What a wonderful journey.

Singing is psychological. In order to do it to the best of your ability, you have to get to know both your body and mind and learn to provide the optimum conditions for them. For me, this means a lot of yoga, having healthy relationships with people and nurturing myself. I was thrilled after my first lesson with Franco on this visit that he could see a great development in my voice and technique, and that he could also see the personal development that had made this possible.

On previous visits he would often say

“Why so tense? Why so nervous? Dimity, singing is about JOY!”

But this time he said

“You've changed, Cara. Now you are like the sun!”

Franco discovered that I over-breathe and exaggerate the singing breathing mechanism. We found that it was important for me not to start with a blocked diaphragm, but rather a soft, gentle, natural inhalation. Only with this type of intake would my voice sit genuinely on the breath. It also calms my vibrato when accompanied by a nice wide throat.

Franco made me keep my arms still and relaxed (I have a bad habit of mirroring the music with my hands). This extraneous energy is wasted and dissipates it from where it should be. It also reflects a disturbed centre.

He also made me look at myself in a mirror while singing. This is an important check mechanism, because any physical habits you can see will definitely be interfering.

Also, looking at yourself lovingly while you sing is hugely beneficial and pays big dividends.

Franco is gifted at accessing the true sound of a singer, rather than an affected one. This for me has been incredible, because I'm chameleon capable of imitating so many different sounds that I can end up not knowing which is really me. He understands that the passagios, or "breaks", in mezzo voice are different than for a soprano. He always says

"Never forget your colour" (of the voice!)

I have sometimes struggled with my upper passagio, and Franco showed me again the idea of the umlaut or French "u", and also that I must "turn" the voice before I get to it in order for the timbre or "colour" to match. He taught me to colour the vowels as I sing higher in order to achieve the Italian "coperto" sound, and that I must keep a high palate, low larynx and wide throat.

With coloratura, Franco makes the diaphragm "bounce" with the notes. This makes a nice, full-bodied, connected sound, although I find I can sing the notes faster with my old technique, so will probably choose which to use according to the context.

Franco has a huge charismatic energy and lust for life. His ears demand no forcing or false production, and the result is dynamic, safe, liberated singing. He has the key. I believe that when sound is produced in this way, it is inherently more moving to listen to, because it is an expression of the very soul of the singer. It is a great privilege to work towards singing like this, and like being connected to the divine when one achieves it.

ROTTERDAM. 20th Nov-25th Nov.

NEW-OP 12

New-Op is an annual meeting held in either Europe or America for people involved in the creation of new works of music theatre and opera. In 2003 it was located in Rotterdam, and I attended due to my passion for new works and the chance to receive stimulus from an international opera community unavailable in Australia. I also wished to include Australia as a partner in this exchange of ideas and expertise.

Over the course of the meeting I saw many performances, and video footage of many new works. The day was scheduled into various talks, presentations and performances, and always finished with dinner and drinks, which was a valuable chance to network and casually exchange information.

A main theme of this year's New-Op was "tuning", which meant a large inclusion of music from outside western traditions using different scales or modes as the basis of their music, as well as new contemporary music which has been inspired by this and as a result works from a much freer harmonic foundation. This opened my ears to a much wider palate of possible choices as a singer. I realised that my experimentation could go much further, and also that most of what I have done so far has been a reflection of only a small part of the music happening in the world, and that there are so many untouched areas of inspiration for me still to find.

I was moved by the inclusion of a lot of Iraqi music at the meeting, such as "Maqam" singing and the qanoun recital (traditional Iraqi instrument) we received at the home of Jamil al Asadi. With the present world climate art can be a vehicle to bring people together and help us understand one another rather than judge.

Many of the new works were exploring the themes of immigration, displacement and our underlying shared humanity. I was heartened by seeing these crucial subjects being worked through in music theatre, and it was clear to me that these performances

were more potent because they had urgent and current relevance to the performers and audience.

“Welcome to Grid City” by Daniel Landau and Isak Goldschneider was such a piece, which traced the experiences of a new immigrant and his efforts to integrate through a fusion of character animation, documentary film and live action. Another was the moving excerpt from Neos Cosmos, by Sokak Tiyatrosu (Theatre of Fifth Street), directed by Mustafa Avkiran. This piece linked the similarities between different religious and social rituals from all over the world, celebrating different cultures while pointing out that we are all essentially the same.

My favourite day at New-Op was when we arrived in the morning to find that we were going to spend the day cycling around Rotterdam to view “places of musical interest”. I had no idea what to expect, and felt a bit alarmed at the prospect of getting back onto a bike for the first time in years! It was an incredible day. First we went to “Waalse Kerk” (Wallonian church) where we entered to a theatrical recital of John Cage by Cora Schmeiser from the Nederlands Vocaal Laboratorium, then on to hear the magical qanoun recital in the living room of refugee Jamil al Asadi’s flat, then across town to what I think was a converted old shipping storage facility where we were privileged to hear the most incredible vocal improvisation by Greetje Bijma. I had never heard of this amazing performer before, but would describe her as a wild cross between a high priestess and Grace Jones, with a voice that appeared limitless in its possibilities, sometimes sounding like birds, like cars, pure then harsh, very high then very deep. She reminded me of the free sound-scape improvisations I used to do when studying at W.A..A.P.A. (West Australian Academy of Performing Arts) many years ago, and made me promise to myself that I would re-introduce them once more to my life and work.

From here we rode to a new theatre space for an established independent theatre company, O.T, which also performs operas, where we were welcomed by Corry Prinsen and Gerda Roest. Finally we rode to the museum Boijmans van Beuningen where we were given the Theatre of Fifth Street performance.

New-Op highlighted to me how hugely varied new works of music theatre and opera are. Although the meeting brings together people who all work in the same broad field, there are inevitably many different “camps”, and although I found I learnt something from everything I saw at the meeting, some of the work was not an example of what I’m aiming to be involved in myself. Not all new music theatre involves highly skilled singers, and although many of these pieces are fantastic, I don’t consider them opera, which is for the most part where I see my future.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, my fellowship helped me to see myself more clearly as a performer within a global context, and to define my strengths and ambitions. It was a very empowering experience that has encouraged me to look at myself as more than just an interpreter of work, but also as someone who can be actively involved in its creation at a grass roots level. I have come to view my career as having three main focuses which I believe combine to produce great performances

1. Mind. To be as informed as much as possible about what you're singing. This means character research, style understanding, language work, musical accuracy.
2. Body. To have the greatest technique possible to be able to free your instrument.
3. Heart. To be emotionally connected to the music, and therefore care about what you're singing about.

These are the qualities I will endeavour to have in my performances, and to instil in my students as necessities in their own work. This is the new breed of opera singer ; resourceful, flexible, brave, looks good, acts well, and sings like a dream.

I presented footage of Australian pieces to attendees at New-Op. They were very interested, and I am hopeful it could even lead to new performance opportunities for these pieces. I was interested to hear feedback and criticism from international colleagues. There was also some interest in me as a performer from a few companies and festivals, which I hope will turn into work opportunities. I met a young composer from Belgium, with whom I am discussing collaborating with. I also consolidated an idea for a new Australian work which I am going to apply to the Australia Council to for funding. In summary this was a most extraordinary experience I will never forget and from which I will continue to draw from for the rest of my career.