

# In search of *The Tempest*: a personal voyage

## Preface

The author is a freelance (opera) composer, writer and non-fiction and thesis editor, and a sometime theatre consultant<sup>1</sup> and music and opera critic.<sup>2</sup>

This monograph is intended neither to defend nor promote his operas—given his background in music and theatre<sup>3</sup> and as a commentator on musical and operatic matters, he will aim to provide as detached a view as possible of both the subject and the context of his own operas, including a consideration of such general issues as stylistic influences and of particular issues such as practical training and experience: third-person word-forms will be used, and he will avoid analysis of the work of other living composers, and thus implied comparisons with his own.

The monograph is not an analysis of the work of other scholars, and for the most part basic information about operas, librettists, composers, singers and productions is derived without specific acknowledgement from standard reference works,<sup>4</sup> scores, or from his own experience. Apart from received wisdom (Mozart was a genius) opinions are his own.

He will reflect on the brief for each of his music theatre projects, the initial concept and its development. He will discuss budgetary and other constraints and, as applicable, the work of the creative and executive arms of production teams—in short, will give an account of the entire process. But he will go further, reflecting on constants and changes in audience expectations, government policy and arts administration.

As the title suggests, he has had a long-term love affair with William Shakespeare's romance, *The Tempest*, and both play and playwright have had an effect on how he views drama and the theatre, and libretti and lyrics and the music composers attach to them.

In his view, there are three crucial theses in the ephemeral world of opera today:

*The goal in opera is transcendence of disbelief rather than its mere suspension.*

*The music of an opera, its 'sound track', is a blueprint rather than the finished product.*

*Many are called, but few are chosen.*

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<sup>1</sup> e.g. Small thrust-stage theatres at the University of Adelaide and The Parks, north of the city.

<sup>2</sup> e.g. The Adelaide *Advertiser*, the *Australian*, *Opera Canada*.

<sup>3</sup> Former critic, Music Faculty member at the University of Adelaide and Elder Conservatorium Opera School production manager, working with Wilfred Mellers, Elyakum Shapirra, Georg Tintner, Jim Vilé, Stanislaus Ostoja-Kotkowski *et al*.

<sup>4</sup> e.g. *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 5<sup>th</sup> edn, Eric Blom ed, Macmillan Press, London 1954-1977; *Kobbé's Complete Opera Book*, edited and revised by the Earl of Harewood, Putnam and Company, London, 1976; *Chambers's Biographical Dictionary*, J.O. Thorne, ed, W. & R. Chambers, Edinburgh and London, 1961; Geoffrey Skelton, *Richard & Cosima Wagner, Biography of a Marriage*, Victor Gollancz Ltd, London, 1982; *Companion to French Literature*, Paul Harvey & J.E. Heseltine eds, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1959.

# A personal voyage in search of *The Tempest*

## Chapter 1: The tour guide: an overview of Western opera

[*Ellipsis points stand for (sometimes lengthy) passages of text that have been omitted.*]

Around Australia, around the Western world, each year hundreds, or more likely thousands of composers and librettists take up Britten's challenge: Let's make an opera!<sup>5</sup>

### Opera as an art form

The term 'opera' means different things to different people, and to different sorts of people—e.g. audience members, singers, instrumentalists, production staff, arts administrators and so on. For the purposes of this monograph, the term is used to identify those forms of Western music theatre written over the last four hundred years ...

### 'Canned' opera

Since the time of the first operas in the late sixteenth centuries, some opera enthusiasts have tended to regard the score or the sound of it as the finished product. More recently, since the advent of the new technologies of long-playing vinyl records, film, audiotapes, videotapes, CDs and DVDs, ...

### Opera as theatre

The truth is, of course, that with some notable exceptions,<sup>6</sup> operas have been written for live performance in front of live audiences on some sort of stage in a theatrical or dramatic setting. The first 'modern' operas<sup>7</sup> were written in the context of then recent developments in drama<sup>8</sup> and theatre design,<sup>9</sup> ...

### Opera as high art—opera as ritual

In this overall context, the first truly great opera is arguably Monteverdi's incomparable *L'Incoronazione di Poppæa*,<sup>10</sup> set in the decadent court of Imperial Rome.

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<sup>5</sup> *Let's Make an Opera*, librettist Eric Crozier after poem by William Blake, composer Benjamin Britten.

<sup>6</sup> e.g. *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, librettist and composer Gian-Carlo Menotti.

<sup>7</sup> Those of Giulio Caccini, Jacopo Peri and their contemporaries four centuries ago.

<sup>8</sup> e.g. The *pastorale*, with some singing to instrumental accompaniment.

<sup>9</sup> The purpose-built theatres with open stages, sometimes with an open pit in front, designed to replicate Classical Greek or Roman theatres (in which aim they generally failed).

<sup>10</sup> Librettist Giovanni Busenello, composer Claudio Monteverdi.

One is hard-put, however, to find more obvious examples of opera as high art than the four long operas making up Richard Wagner's *Bühnenfestspiel für drei Tage und einen Vorabend* (stage festival play for three days and a preliminary evening), his epic *Der Ring des Nibelungen*;<sup>11</sup> ...

### Opera as entertainment

In 2000, Westerners relied on television and blockbuster films and musicals for much of their entertainment; in 1950 the corresponding media were film, radio, live theatre and musicals; in 1900 it was live theatre (including vaudeville), and opera (including comic opera), much as over the preceding couple of centuries ...

### Opera as moral statement—and as propaganda

Although librettists and composers have for the most part avoided overt moralising, preferring (in some cases forced by political or moral censors) to use more covert methods, Beethoven's *Fidelio* is famously uncompromising in its condemnation of man's inhumanity to man ...

### Scenario—libretto

Opinions as to words suitable for setting to music vary from Aristophanes's:

For music any words are good enough.<sup>12</sup>

or Addison's:

Nothing is capable of being set to music that is not nonsense.<sup>13</sup>

to that of Wagner, who regarded opera libretti so seriously that he always wrote his own.

Opera scenarios and libretti vary greatly in style and content ...

... with more or less universal education in the Western world, and with a more or less equal chance of everyone's at least becoming aware of just about every topic under the sun, every nuance of human behaviour has become available to the opera composer, and thus the librettist ...

### Music

For many people the music is the opera. For some enthusiasts the singing is the opera—eighteenth-century Italian opera comes to mind, a field in which the libretto, the drama, the impresario and opera company were subservient to the principal singers ...

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<sup>11</sup> Librettist and composer Richard Wagner.

<sup>12</sup> Aristophanes, *The Birds*, J.R. Planché (transl.), quoted in *An Encyclopædia of Quotations about Music* (Nat Shapiro ed), David & Charles, London, 1978.

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Addison, in *Spectator* No. 8, quoted in *The Frank Muir Book*, Heinemann, London 1976.

## Orchestral instruments—players—venues—acoustics

To hear old works like Monteverdi's *Orfeo* with instruments built on the original models is paradoxically to enter a brave, perpetually renewed world ...

Increasingly wealthy patrons, cities and states were building larger theatres capable of holding ever larger audiences, such as ...

The biggest change in opera orchestras in the nineteenth century came with the advent of Wagner. In *Götterdämmerung* ...

The next major change came in around 1950. The development of the cathode ray oscilloscope meant that for the first time physicists and instrument makers, notably brass-instrument makers, could see sound, could analyse it ...

As a result of changes in the design of brass instruments, the orchestral sound changed radically ...

Because of the changes in instrument design, some compositional techniques that worked a century ago are problematic now. Composers of today might have a richer pallet to work with, but many of the colours are opaque ...

## Singers

The history of opera singing has some interesting parallels with that of orchestral instruments and players. What was true for the orchestra in Monteverdi's day was true for the singers ...

The major problem that arose when orchestras modernised and expanded and theatres became larger (as described above) ...

So much for the human body, but what of the human mind? ...

## Musical director

## Production team

## Director

## Audience

## Critics & commentators

## Summary

## Chapter 2: Setting English words to music

### Introduction

In this chapter the matter of setting English to music is examined briefly, first in general terms, and then in terms of the work of several internationally known English composers

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From the work of each composer one, two or three individual 'numbers' of interest are examined, as appropriate, in terms of the background to their composition, the story, scenario, libretto, forces required and overall mood or moods; the structure of the text, and of the music; the melody in relation to the words (including consideration of inherent speech rhythm and inflection); the musical language; and the impact on live audiences.

The examples cover a wide variety of moods as well as styles. There is no detailed consideration of numbers using orchestra only.

### General considerations [brief summary]

The English language is characterised by its eclecticism, with its origins in Celtic, Latin (and Greek), Anglo-Saxon, Danish and Norman French. It has borrowed extensively from its neighbours in Europe and from colonies all around the world.<sup>14</sup> As a result of this hybridisation, its vocabulary is immense and capable of great subtlety, its grammar is relatively straightforward and its syntax flexible, and it lends itself to vivid imagery. This is not to say that other languages lack their attractions, or that English is without its clumsinesses (sic) ...

#### **Celtic**

Relatively little remains of the pre-Roman, Cornish, Welsh, Manx or Gaelic legacy ...

#### **Latin (and Greek)**

The Latin and Greek heritage is very strong, particularly in what one might call 'high-toned language' ...

#### **Anglo-Saxon, Jutish and Friesian**

#### **Old Norse**

#### **Norman French**

#### **Vocabulary**

### Speech rhythms

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<sup>14</sup> David Crystal, *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of the English Language*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995.

etc.

## Composer 1.

### **Background**

#### **Example 1 ' ... '**

The overall mood of this song ...

The structure of the text ...

The structure of the music ...

The melody ... in relation to the words ...

The musical language ...

Audiences ...

## Composer 2: \_\_\_\_\_ ' ... '

### **Background**

#### **Story**

#### **Scenario**

#### **Libretto**

#### **Forces required**

#### **Example 2: '...'**

The overall mood of this aria ...

...

etc.

## Summary

## Chapter 3: *The Letters of Amalie Dietrich* An opera in one act

Librettist: Andrew Taylor

Composer: Ralph Middenway

### Background

In 1984, the composer approached State Opera of South Australia ...

...

A submission to the Australia Council for funding for a commission was successful. The opera was written during 1986.

### Brief

The brief was to write an opera for four singers and orchestra ...

### Process

#### *Dramatis personæ*

### Scenario

The opera is about the timeless dilemma faced by a professional woman on her own with a young daughter. Must she sacrifice one for the sake of the other?

### Libretto

### Music

### Production pencilled in for 1989

### Funding crisis

### Piano workshop of a large part of the work

### Future prospects

# Chapter 4: *Barossa* A *Singspiel* in two acts

Librettist: Andrew Taylor

Composer: Ralph Middenway

## Background

In 1986, the composer approached the School of Music of the South Australian College of Advanced Education (SACAE)<sup>15</sup> to enquire whether it would be interested to commission for the Australian Bicentennial in 1988 a *Singspiel*<sup>16</sup> based on the well-documented official suppression of German language and culture in the substantially Lutheran Barossa Valley north of Adelaide.<sup>17</sup> ...

## Brief

## Process

## *Dramatis personæ*

## Scenario

## Libretto

## Music

## Performance of excerpts in concert

## Funding crisis

## Production

## Performances

## Future prospects

## Transcription and complete revision

In 2000 ...

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<sup>15</sup> The School of Music of the College was later amalgamated with the Elder Conservatorium within the University of Adelaide.

<sup>16</sup> For the rationale behind suggesting this operatic form, see Process (below).

<sup>17</sup> *The German Experience in Australia*, Ian Harmstorf & Peter Schwerdtfeger (eds), the Australian Association of von Humboldt Fellows, Adelaide, 1988.

## Chapter 5: Other projects

### Introduction

After the Bicentennial party, the hangover ...  
Federal Government and Australia Council policy changes ...  
Impact on freelance composers ...

### Potential music-theatre projects

### Completed music-theatre projects

### Tempest pilot projects

## Chapter 6: William Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*

### Introduction

This short chapter summarises significant aspects of the play from the point of view of a composer considering using it as the basis for an opera ...

### The play

#### **The story**

#### **The play in performance**

### Operas based on the play

There have been at least ...

The first known *Tempest* 'opera' was ...

... including at least four in the last few years, by Americans Peter Talbot Westergaard (1994) and Lee Hoiby (1996), and British Thomas Adès, with another derived from the play by English-born Australian Peter Tahourdin.

#### **The operas in performance**

No *Tempest* opera has yet established itself in the standard repertoire ...

The reasons for these past failures in general appear to be ...

(Although première productions of the new American and British works seem to have been well received, only time will tell whether or not they survive on stage.)

## Chapter 7: A new *Tempest* opera

Libretto from play by William Shakespeare

Composer: Ralph Middenway

Process

Style

Setting

Scenario

Masque

*Dramatis personæ*

Libretto

*Storm Dance and Act 1 Scene 1*

Completion of the score

**Commission**

One can argue that no composer in his/her right mind would spend a year or two writing an opera without a commission and with no certainty that it would ever be performed. Gustav Holst went one recognisable stage further:

Never compose anything unless the not composing of it becomes a positive nuisance ...<sup>18</sup>

...

In late 2003 ...

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<sup>18</sup> Gustav Holst, letter to William Gillies Whittaker, 1921, quoted in *An Encyclopædia of Quotations about Music* (ibid.)

## Chapter 8: Conclusion: Retrospect ... and prospects

### The future of opera

In an era in which radio, videotapes, CDs, DVDs and live telecasts ...  
one might wonder ...

Audiences ...

Promotion ...

Budgets ...

Public funding ...

Private benefactors ...

Corporate sponsors ...

And yet universities and conservatoriums continue to train ...

Training programmes

**Musical directors**

**Singers**

**Orchestral players**

**Directors**

**Designers**

**Production staff**

**Administrators**

### Future of live performing arts

Trends that apply in the world of opera also apply ... But ...

### *The Tempest*—the project

The writer's personal voyage in search of *The Tempest* began in around 1970 and the score,  
*a blueprint rather than the finished product* ...

### *The Tempest*—its future

...

Who knows?—after all, *many are called, but few are chosen*.

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