

AN AUSTRALIAN JOURNEY

Julie Simonds chats with Australian composer Andrew Schultz who has written a number of large scale works including three operas

JS: YOUR LATEST WORK *GHOSTS OF REASON* – *SYMPHONY NO 2* WAS PREMIERED BY THE ADELAIDE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA IN SEPTEMBER.

AS: *Ghosts of Reason* – *Symphony no 2* was sketched out while I was in residence at the Banff Centre for the Arts in Canada. What I had in mind is the way that musical forms, like landscapes, can seem to be haunted by past inhabitants. I feel this applies to Australia a lot. I remember, as a child growing up in Western Victoria, an abandoned place where I used to go to play. It had been a house years before and was just broken building bits now with foundations but no walls, plus a fantastic wattle grove – cold but beautiful in winter. The sense of being somewhere remote but lived in before was palpable, even without thinking about the Aboriginal history before that. Musical forms are like this to me – for an Australian composer, Beethoven and Schubert seem to be wandering the Simpson Desert at times.

JS: DID YOU HAVE A PREDOMINANTLY CLASSICAL MUSICAL TRAINING?

AS: Yes, my training was entirely classical but compared to many composers and musicians I was relatively a late starter. I had piano lessons for a few years when fairly young but it was only when I got going with the clarinet as a teenager that music moved quickly from an interest to a complete preoccupation in my life. By the time I was finishing high school at St Peter's College in Brisbane I was hooked! I think my first compositions were written fairly shortly after starting on clarinet – when I was about 14 or so. Although I've changed quite a bit as a composer I always find it strangely eerie and familiar to see what I was doing then has many similarities to where I am now – right down to notes and rhythms.

JS: HOW DID YOU FALL INTO COMPOSITION?

AS: As a teenager I was taken by the beauty of musical sound and the wonderful way in which music can communicate so much and still say nothing. I couldn't hear or absorb enough as a teenager – I literally wanted to hear everything. So the twentieth century greats were a real inspiration – Stravinsky, Ravel, Debussy, and Copland, to mention but four. 'Nothing tickles the brain like music,' as they say and I have found that over and over. The sonority of simple sounds as well as the excitement of counterpoint have always inspired me, as has the great journey in the most profound classical orchestral works. Having said that, there were several times when, as a student at the University of Queensland, I almost gave up – partly because I was doing well in other academic things and partly because I could see already that the music world is not entirely sane and would present many personal challenges. And – guess what – I was right, but I don't regret sticking with it.

JS: *JOURNEY TO HORSESHOE BEND* (TEXT BY GORDON KALTON WILLIAMS) IS A SYMPHONIC CANTATA WHICH WAS PERFORMED IN 2003. YOU SEEM TO ENJOY COMPOSING ABOUT AUSTRALIANS AND THE LANDSCAPE. IS THIS AN IMPORTANT ASPECT IN YOUR COMPOSITION?

AS: I think composers, like other artists, consciously or unconsciously interpret their place and time. The events and places in a life find their way into what you do even when you least expect it or plan for it to happen. In some of my bigger choral or operatic pieces that fact is more obvious than in smaller instrumental pieces because there are words to explain what is happening – and *Journey to Horseshoe Bend* is a prime example for me. The piece takes a lot from the landscape and the environment and was a work in which I really expressed a great love of Australia and joy at returning home having spent the previous five years in London working as Head of Composition at the Guildhall School. My creative roots are in Australia.

JS: LAST YEAR YOUR MAJOR PROJECT WAS A CHAMBER OPERA, *THE CHILDREN'S BACH*. TELL US ABOUT THIS.

AS: It's an intimate piece and we tried to do something different. In the opera we see in detail what is going on in the minds of a few characters in a domestic situation that Helen Garner had constructed in her lovely book. The storytelling is unusual and quite subtle as there are numerous short scenes and a contrapuntal unfolding of the characters. In a gentle way I think it challenges the idea of what a new opera should be.

JS: SO MANY OF YOUR WORKS SEEM TO LOOK AT AUSTRALIAN LANDSCAPE, EG SOUTHERN OCEAN AND BARREN GROUNDS. DO YOU AGREE?


AS: Yes definitely – but there are always people in the landscape: perplexed, passionate or just plain lost. I live on the coast south of Sydney and the horizon of seascape and backdrop of escarpment is always there in what I do. I think that my music often seems

spacious and alone – that is pretty much how I feel things in my life. Being outside is very important for me and so living near the Royal National Park is a great bonus.

JS: AND YOU SEEM TO HAVE A PREOCCUPATION WITH DEATH? AM I BEING TOO FORWARD?

AS: Death and love are the two great themes of art and life, I guess.

JS: IN 2007 YOU RECEIVED THE SCHUELER AWARD FOR COMPOSITION FROM THE ADELAIDE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA. WHAT'S NEXT?

AS: Pieces for Sydney Philharmonia Choir and Orchestra, Sydney Chamber Choir and Gondwana Voices. 

Andrew Schultz's Suspended Preludes and Song of Songs CDs are out now.

