

COMPOSER INTERVIEW

The World Turned Upside Down: An Interview with Elliott Gyger

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Elliott Gyger is Senior Lecturer in Composition at the University of Melbourne. His undergraduate studies were undertaken with Peter Sculthorpe at the University of Sydney. Gyger then completed a PhD at Harvard University, working with Mario Davidovsky. He has composed music for various Australian and international ensembles, and has received numerous awards, including the 2013 Paul Lowin Song Cycle Award. His most recent projects include a dynamic, hour-long solo piano work for Michael Kieran Harvey, titled *Inferno* (2013), and *Smoke and Mirrors* (2014), a concerto for tenor saxophone and orchestra. Gyger's first opera, *Fly Away Peter*, to a libretto by Pierce Wilcox, was premiered in May 2015 by Sydney Chamber Opera. The critically acclaimed opera is based on the novel of the same name by Australian author David Malouf, and explores themes of nature, war, and the individual.

Your opera *Fly Away Peter* is a major new work in the repertory. What was the genesis of this exciting project?

The original brief was from Joel Brennan, Lecturer in Brass at the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music, who wanted a companion piece for performance alongside Stravinsky's *The Soldier's Tale*—a piece with the same instrumentation, but with an Australian text: a war-related text.

What drew you to setting David Malouf's story to music?

I'd never read *Fly Away Peter*, but I knew of it, and I knew Malouf's other books. Once I started looking for Australian First World War literature, it didn't take me long to find. When I read it through, I thought: 'this is very beautiful'. It's very musical. Is it operatic? I'm not sure.

What made you have doubts?

Well, the characters don't talk to each other very much; there's almost no dialogue. I thought of doing it as a monodrama, basically having just one singer. But that's musically very limiting in certain ways, and it's a really big ask for the one singer to be on stage and carry the entire show. There were just so many possibilities with a couple of other singers. So we ended up with a cast of three, who predominately represent the three point-of-view characters. It's really very much centred on one of them—Jim Saddler—and then there are two others: Ashley Crowther and Imogen Harcourt, who are his friends.

It still left us with the problem of dialogue. But the more we worked on the libretto, the clearer it became that, actually, we didn't need them to speak to one another.

How does an opera work without dialogue?

Generally, opera sucks at dialogue! There are very few operas where real dialogue can work. In a lot of operas, the dialogue is very stilted; it's not actually where the heart is. If you go back to the origins of opera in recitative, it wasn't long before they realised you needed arias as well. And by the time you get to the Baroque period, the recitative is the inconvenient stuff you get through as fast as possible. The musical nuts and bolts are in the arias.

Opera is really about revelation of character. It's about development of character, and to some extent, or often, it's about interaction between characters; but it doesn't have to be. So, what we have in *Fly Away Peter* is, in a way, parallel monologue, sometimes involving characters who are very much in sympathy with one another, which is what happens in a classical operatic duet or quartet. I guess the typical example is the Act III quartet in Verdi's *Rigoletto*. All four characters are thinking different thoughts, and communicating those directly to the audience.

That's opera's home terrain in a way: the expression of not only thoughts that are voiced, but thoughts that are unvoiced. Years ago, when I was writing about *Moses und Aron*, I was looking up things about speech versus song in musicals. And in that context, I came across this lovely idea that, basically, in a musical the song and dance is subtext, raised to the level of articulateness; when characters burst into song, they're breaking out of the dialogue frame, and conveying what in a straight play would be subtext.

With regard to approaching the idea of text, or text setting from a musical point of view, how did you marry the libretto with your own musical language?

One thing that I've developed across the vocal pieces I've written—particularly the solos, and those for the chamber ensemble Halcyon—is finding a natural delivery for text. It's very important, and it's got to do more with timing than anything else. Musical declamation is not the same as naturalistic speech: it goes much more slowly in general. But really, the key is, where in the phrase do you take time? Where in the phrase do you make a break? And also, how much space do you leave between one statement and the next?

The other thing is clarity. Most of the time, I aim to keep the text extremely clear. At the very beginning of the opera, for example, the main character, Jim, is accompanied only by two instruments for the first two minutes of the opera. It's just violin and vibraphone in their high range with Jim, who's a baritone and the lowest part of the texture most of the time. Often the texture is very sparse, and that helps to keep things clear.

But the librettist, Pierce Wilcox, was very clever with the construction of the libretto, in that there's a lot of repetition. Not so much immediate repetition—I put in some for musical purposes, but not very much—but there are key phrases, or key formulations, that keep coming back across the whole opera. So you start to recognise them as formulations, and you can guess what's being said.

What sort of formulations?

For example, the first line of the opera—'See the bird'—becomes a sort of leitmotif. It's an important first line, because not only is Jim obsessed with birds, he's also an observer. Not only does he try to get to the heart of what birds are doing, and what the natural world is doing, but, when he ends up in the trenches, he tries also to observe his fellow soldiers with just as much insight. So, 'See the bird' becomes, sort of, the central point around which the music unfolds, actually, in a literal way too.

Can you provide some insight into your technique in composing the opera? What sort of materials did you use?

As so often with my music, there was a level of pre-compositional planning. And for this work, one important aspect of it was mirror symmetry. What I got from the book, in terms of a metaphor to deal with pitch, I suppose, is the idea of landscape. The opening image of the book, and the opera, is Jim, in the landscape, looking at the birds. We're in Southeast Queensland: it's largely a flat landscape with gently undulating hills, swampland marshes, beaches, and this huge sky above. The first paragraph of the libretto is:

See the bird
From below I watch it rise
See the land
From above I map its life

So Jim's looking up at the bird, from ground level. But then when he's 'looking down at the land,' he might be imagining himself as the bird. What's laid out in the first lines of the libretto is a dichotomy. We have the air, which is the terrain of the birds. And we have the earth, which is the terrain of mankind. And this comes and goes all the way through the book, and through the opera as well. When Jim is in the trenches, the men are digging themselves into the earth, which is their element.

I wanted this sense, then, of symmetry—that you look up to the air, and you look down to the earth, but in some ways these worlds are mirrors of one another. The two worlds are opposite poles, but they intersect. And so I created a set of twenty-one harmonic objects—you could call them chords—of five notes each. They're fixed-register structures. They're arranged around a central group of five notes (BCDEF), and indeed around the central note of that group, which is the D natural just above middle C. These chords are sometimes used as chords, but more often they're appoggiated as a source for melody.

I also devised a very complicated latticework with these twenty-one chords: they are arranged in a grid of 3x7. Every chord contains one and only one note in common with the chords that are adjacent to it in the grid. Which means, if there are five notes in the chord, one is unique to that chord and doesn't occur in any others, one is shared with the chord above it, one with the chord below it, one with the chord to the left and one with the chord to the right. And at the edges of the grid, it sort of loops around, so if you go to the extreme right-hand end, it's considered adjacent to the chord on the extreme left-hand end. I think of it like wallpaper: you get a little segment, but this segment is actually replicated *ad infinitum* in any direction. That gives you a grid of finite size, but of infinite extent, in that you can move around it in any direction infinitely. You just keep recrossing your tracks.

It took quite some juggling to get that grid to work. Each of the five-note chords also has a different intervallic structure, as in, if you reduce it to a pitch class set, the intervallic relationships are different. And they all contain all six possible chromatic intervals. So they are all-interval pentachords. The chord in the middle is mirror symmetrical in itself, but if you take one half of the grid, it flips itself by mirror inversion onto the other half of the grid.

It's quite a complex system! Did you ever find it became too restrictive on the music? Did you ever want to 'break free'?

I did find a very high level of consistency in the sonic result, so I found that I needed to go elsewhere. The point when I decided I needed to go elsewhere was the point in the opera where Jim actually moves into the trenches.

At that point, the music becomes a lot more dense. One of the moments of insight from early in the book is when Jim is walking down the street in Brisbane and he hears that war has broken out. And all of a sudden it seems to him that, whereas everything was on a level keel, now everything's off kilter, and everybody is no longer completely in control of what they're doing. So there's this metaphor that the world 'tilts.'

Later in the opera, when Jim gets to the trenches, it's like the world is upside-down. He's gone to the dark half of the world, so I had to come up with something more radical for when we move to the war. So I thought, ok, what if I take those twenty-one chords, and reorganise them into a different kind of lattice, so they no longer have notes in common with the chords around them? Then there's actually more friction between each chord and the next. Each chord is still intact, so you've got the possibility of referring to things from earlier on [in the opera] that involve those chords as themselves, but they then start to combine with chords around them to make larger chords.

What happens for this new grid is you can go only to the chords that are not one step away but two steps away in the original grid. Which means, if you're starting from the central square, you can either go across diagonally up one, or across, up or down two. That gives you a total of six chords that you can get to. The geometrics are a bit complicated, but in fact if you applied the same logic to every square, you get a very elegantly twisted version of the original lattice.

One of the reasons I set up things so strictly was because it was necessary in order to do things fast. I needed to create something that was a bit rigid; not something that would write the music for me—it still left me plenty of room—but I needed my choices to be contained a bit.

How long did it take you to write the piece?

I had a deadline that was shifted on me, which actually ended up being fantastic. I was doing the work in quite a collaborative way, and I had the chance to work with some of the singers early on, so I had their voices in my ear. The tenor (Brenton Spiteri) and baritone (Mitchell Riley) came and sang through the first scene when I was still only halfway through the second. And as it happens, I already knew the third singer, Jessica Aszodi, having worked with her before. I was writing the opera quite fast. Effectively, I wrote the whole hour of music between 20 October and about 24 February. That's four months to write 65 minutes of music, which is ludicrously fast! It basically worked out to about 30 seconds a day.

Do you feel that pushed the music in a particular direction?

My experience when I've been on deadlines like this in the past is actually that it throws you back on your instincts a bit. It might mean that you're being less adventurous in some ways, but it also means that actually you get very inventive, very fast. I'm too close to the piece, still, to know how I will think about it in three or four years time.

How does it feel now?

To me it feels very personal; it feels like I've successfully found a way to make it work for me, and sound like me, and it's the best opera that I could have written at this point. I love the libretto. I found the cast and the ensemble were the right size to force me to be inventive with them. I was working with really good instrumentalists and singers, so I wasn't pulling any punches in terms of finding notes, and that sort of thing.

Do you think it's a hard sing?

There are places to find the notes, but it's not an easy sing at all. But all three singers are utterly superb musicians. And the other amazing factor in this is Jack Symonds, the conductor, who is unbelievable. He's got perfect pitch. He essentially has the score memorised—he had it memorised by the first performance. He wouldn't let the singers get out of line by an inch during rehearsal. And by the time I came into the rehearsal process, which was about two weeks out from opening night, they were note perfect. And they had been for some time.

Can we talk about the instrumental ensemble you used for the piece; it uses the same forces as Stravinsky's *The Soldier's Tale*?

Yes, seven instruments: clarinet, bassoon, trumpet (or cornet), trombone, percussion, violin and double bass. I kept exactly that instrumentation, though I made a few small additions. I added vibraphone to the percussion, which was crucially important, because it gave me a lot more pitch options. It also gave me a lot more resonance options. I also kept Stravinsky's unpitched percussion set-up; his entire setup of *The Soldier's Tale* is embedded into the setup of this, with just a few additions, just a tam tam, and a whistle, like an officer's whistle. I added bass clarinet to the clarinet part, but only in the last few scenes.

Basically I'm only dealing with an ensemble of seven, so I have to be as resourceful as possible to get different colours in the different scenes and in different parts of those scenes. Up until the moment the world tilts—it's at the end of the first scene in the opera—I'd almost not used the lower half of the ensemble. When you take out the main treble-register colours,

all of a sudden you've got bassoon, bass clarinet, trombone, double bass—you've got this incredibly rich low range available.

For the first scene, which is all about the air, there's just vibraphone and violin. The clarinet joins in later, and then muted trumpet later again. And then the ensemble sort of shifts on its axis, so at the beginning of Scene Two, where Jim is on his way to the War, the ensemble consists initially of clarinet, bassoon, trombone and double bass. We sort of shift to the dark half of the world.

Did you reference any parts of Stravinsky's work in your own?

Well, there are almost no musical references in the opera to *The Soldier's Tale*, other than what comes out of the ensemble. But there was one place, or one aspect of it, where I did appeal directly to Stravinsky.

One of the most chilling moments in the Stravinsky work, for me, or the most brilliant musical inventions, is the very end. The soldier thinks he's come through all unscathed, but at the last minute he slips—basically transgresses his bail conditions, as it were—and the devil triumphs and carts him off to hell. The piece ends with him being taken away to eternal damnation, and the music is just this drum solo—four un-pitched drums: a side drum with the snares off, two tom toms effectively, and a bass drum.

So I thought, ok, this is the point in the opera where Jim descends to hell, in this case the living hell of the trenches. So, I came up with my own version of Stravinsky's solo. There's no direct musical reference; it's just the four un-pitched drums. It's not dissimilar [to Stravinsky's solo], I guess, in terms of the gestural progression. It grows directly out of marching rhythms that appear earlier in the same scene, which are played on snare drums with the snares on.

What were some of the biggest challenges in developing *Fly Away Peter*?

The challenge, or one of the challenges in something like this, is that there are three people on stage. We're staging World War I, with three people, and not a particularly large budget. How on earth do you do this? We needed some way of suggesting that this War was not something that was going on in the heads of three people, a way to get us out of Jim's head and to create some sort of larger world with which he's interacting.

And this was the hardest thing for us to work out, in the libretto. We went back and forth on it, quite a bit. I think the solution we came up with in the end was very resourceful, which is that the tenor who plays Jim's friend at home—Ashley Crowther, who also enlists at the same time as Jim, but ends up in a different unit—doubles duty as eight other soldiers. We thought we were not going to have time to do costume changes, and we had to find a way of somehow making this believable on stage.

We were greatly assisted by the fact that Brenton Spiteri (the tenor) is a great actor. These extra characters only appear in two scenes. They're introduced in Scene Three, where Jim has travelled to the War, and he's meeting the other soldiers, and we get a little series of vignettes, eight of them one after the other. These soldiers have, some of them, something like two lines of dialogue. The ones who have more might have six lines.

So, Jim introduces the soldiers by name. They say where they're from, they give a little piece of colour of something about them, and then it's up to the director and the singer to flesh that out on stage to become a character. They appear quite rapidly, and the scene is sort

of humorous. It's one of the few light-hearted moments. They are ordinary men, just like Jim, but in the next scene, we see them again in the trenches, one after the other, and most of them are either dead or permanently disabled by the end of the scene.

There are just these tiny little moments, one after other, and it's the concatenation off those things, that bombardment, where the libretto goes past as fast as possible. It's like seeing the whole of World War I within ten minutes. Once we'd sorted that out, the rest of the libretto was relatively straightforward. But that was the key thing: we had to find a way of making this [opera] epic, and epic in its sense of scale.

Opera is an epic medium; or at least grand opera, in the traditional sense, is known for being epic. The direction of contemporary opera seems to be a reaction to that, in a way: productions on a much smaller scale and with limited means. What would you say about that?

In a way, yes. Absolutely. I think that the large operatic medium ... it's fascinating, but it's got a lot of challenges. There are musical things that you can't do with large forces, or for that matter with large voices, those that will fill a large operatic space. The means of production is very different. The notion of an ensemble with matched voices singing in close voice is something that's very hard to bring off in a large operatic context.

The other thing is that *Fly Away Peter* is essentially an intimate book about world events. In a way, making an intimate opera about it made perfect sense. It would be a very different ask to do *War and Peace* as a chamber opera. I wouldn't want to say that it could never be done, but with Prokofiev's *War and Peace*, it's the full shebang, and it works. You know, boiling Tolstoy down to five hours is probably a more amazing task than boiling the Malouf down to one hour. But the grandeur of the subject suits the grandeur of the scale of the medium.

Here, in a way, the aspect of miniaturisation, of making the thing intimate, was already there in the Malouf, and it was such a natural fit.

About the Interviewer

Andrew Aronowicz is a composer, writer and teacher. He has received commissions from the Arts Centre Melbourne, Macedon Music and Plexus Ensemble, and his works have been performed by the Tasmanian and Melbourne Symphony Orchestras. In 2016 his composition *Strange Alchemy* was chosen by ABC Classic FM as their under-30 entry to the International Rostrum of Composers in Poland.