Portfolio of Compositions

Becky Llewellyn

Orchestral Tone Poem -

Rothko’s Red

Comprising score and CD of performance

&

Music Theatre Work -

The Portrait: a musical tribute to Stella Bowen

Comprising chamber ensemble score, libretto and DVD of performance

Rebecca Ann Llewellyn

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for Master of Music

Elder Conservatorium of Music
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Abstract

The portfolio contains two of Becky Llewellyn’s music compositions: an orchestral tone poem and a chamber opera score and libretto created to explore the process of producing a major work of music theatre from conception to performance. In both works, Llewellyn’s research has concentrated on her interest in structure and form between ideas, music and visual art and their relationship to each other.

Rothko’s Red

The first composition in her submission is her orchestral tone poem, Rothko’s Red, a tribute to US artist Mark Rothko, whose painting techniques questioned traditional forms of narrative and structure.

The topographical matrix of Rothko’s Red contains vertical aural space introduced in a ‘keyed up’ range suggesting ‘redness’, gradually deepening until the bass predominates, retaining a widened spaciality at the peak moment. Horizontally, the piece is a long crescendo of extended phrases, at first lightweight, then filling out with each repetition, moving to a full expression of orchestral magnitude, then gradually subsiding. The tone poem passes limited melodies and harmonies around to and within the orchestral families, as if in one colour. Llewellyn’s use of individual dynamics for orchestral players is an experiment in aural equivalence of Rothko techniques, using ‘heard’, not ‘seen’ tone colours.

The Portrait: a musical tribute to Stella Bowen

Llewellyn’s chamber opera is based on books, letters, diaries and family history research into the life of Adelaide-born writer and painter, Stella Bowen and three other writers. The opera’s libretto is structured as a series of songs reflecting Bowen’s paintings and life story.

The chamber opera opens and closes in 1944, with Bowen as a WWII Australian war artist. The opera spans from 1917, when as a London art student, Bowen is introduced to editor/writer, Ford Madox Ford with whom she falls in love. The opera moves through to Paris and Ford’s subsequent love affair with writer Jean Rhys and his death in 1939.
The Portrait is an exploration of how we know who we are and how, as artists, we choose to represent those insights. As the four main characters each wrote about themselves and each other, Llewellyn used their distinct content, style and aesthetic concerns to invent their musical and dramatic personae. The Portrait plays with ideas these four artists explored of extended metaphors, a shifting ambiguity in ‘artifice as a real story’, in an imagined dramatic musical work about real artists and writers; life as art and art as life.

Among other themes in The Portrait; thanatos and eros, culture and morality, war and peace, fate and choice and opera as portraiture, is an underlying structural theme of time itself. Mythic time is explored as fairytale. Historical time ranges from 1920s chordal and dance motifs back to associations of medieval castles, where western-style Romantic love began. Personal, subjective experience of time is explored by most characters, as is the lack of artistic time given domestic commitments. Objective ‘time as limited’ is explored with Ford’s death and the impending death of the Australian bomber crew. Llewellyn focuses on the time-based art-form of music, while incorporating words, Bowen’s paintings and archival photographs in a chamber opera that explores the potential each art-form carries for revelation.
Thesis Declaration

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis plus CD and DVD recordings, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

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Dated…………………………………………………..
Acknowledgments

Many thanks to the performing arts organisations who have supported these compositions: the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra for its workshop performance of Rothko’s Red and Co-Opera, the Adelaide based regional touring opera company for The Portrait. Co-Opera, the Australia Council, ArtSA and the Adelaide Festival Centre have all contributed funds since The Portrait’s workshop performance in 2005, through to subsequent seven performances at The Space Theatre in Adelaide and seven regional centres in NSW, ACT and Victoria in 2006.

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Becky Llewellyn

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