

**THE POETICS OF LIBRETTI:  
READING THE OPERA WORKS OF GWEN  
HARWOOD AND LARRY SITSKY**

**Alison J E Wood**

Submitted for the degree of  
Master of Arts, Research  
Discipline of English  
School of Humanities and Social Sciences  
University of Adelaide  
December 2007

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS.....</b>	<b>II</b>
<b>LIST OF FIGURES.....</b>	<b>IV</b>
<b>ABSTRACT.....</b>	<b>V</b>
<b>DECLARATION.....</b>	<b>VI</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....</b>	<b>VII</b>
<b>1 INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 The Harwood/Sitsky Collaboration.....	2
1.2 Harwood and the Critics.....	3
1.3 On Interpreting Libretti.....	4
1.4 Reading Harwood.....	6
<b>2 LIBRETTI IN CONTEXT.....</b>	<b>9</b>
2.1 A Brief History of Libretti.....	9
2.2 Libretti, Musicology and the New Interdisciplinary Opera Studies.....	12
2.2.1 <i>What Kind of Text?</i> .....	15
2.2.2 <i>Reading Libretti</i> .....	16
2.3 Harwood's Libretti – Methodological Platforms.....	18
<b>3 ‘MUSIC, MY JOY, MY FULL SCALE GOD’: HARWOOD’S SINGABLE LINES.....</b>	<b>21</b>
3.1 Writing under the influence: Music and Harwood.....	22
3.2 How to Write a Singable Line.....	26
3.2.1 <i>Questions of Compatibility: Poetic and Musical Rhythms</i> .....	27
3.2.2 <i>Language, Texture and Dramatic Clarity</i> .....	29
3.2.3 <i>Intertextuality and Textual Transformation</i> .....	33
<b>4 SIGHT AND SOUND: LIBRETTI ON STAGE.....</b>	<b>39</b>
4.1 Negotiating Dramatic Effect.....	39
4.2 Operatic Drama: Singing Characters, Truncated Stories.....	42
4.3 Writing for the Visual.....	47
4.4 Visual Transformations: Oscar Wilde’s <i>De Profundis</i> .....	51
<b>5 ON COLLABORATION: PLATFORMS AND PRACTICE.....</b>	<b>57</b>
5.1 Platforms for Collaboration.....	57
5.2 Harwood’s Operatic Persona.....	64
5.3 Singular Texts: Plural Authors.....	66
<b>6 CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>71</b>
6.1 Harwood’s Libretti and the Critical Context.....	71
6.2 Harwood and Literary Considerations.....	73
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHIES.....</b>	<b>75</b>
References.....	75
Gwen Harwood: A Select Bibliography.....	88
<i>Poetry</i> .....	88
<i>Words for Music</i> .....	88
<i>Poems Set to Music</i> .....	89
<i>Short Stories</i> .....	90
<i>Articles and Miscellaneous Works</i> .....	90
<i>Papers and Correspondence</i> .....	90
<i>Interviews and Sound Recordings</i> .....	91
<b>APPENDICES.....</b>	<b>93</b>
Appendix A: Textual Notes for the Harwood and Sitsky Operas.....	93
A.1 <i>The Fall of the House of Usher</i> (1965).....	94

A.2 <i>Lenz</i> (1970).....	100
A.3 <i>Fieery Tales: A Comic Opera in One Act</i> (1975).....	113
A.4 <i>Voices in Limbo: A Radiophonic Opera</i> (1977).....	126
A.5 <i>The Golem</i> (1980; performed 1993).....	133
A.6 <i>De Profundis (A Monodrama)</i> (1982).....	153
Appendix B: Additional Material: <i>The Fall of the House of Usher</i> .....	156
Appendix C: Score Excerpts: <i>Voices in Limbo</i> .....	158
Appendix D: Selected Vocal Works by Larry Sitsky, and published extracts from <i>The Golem</i> .....	161
<i>Vocal Works</i> .....	161
<i>Choral Works</i> .....	161
<i>Published Extracts from The Golem</i> .....	162

## Errata Sheet

For the digital version of a thesis for the Master of Arts

### THE POETICS OF LIBRETTI: READING THE OPERA WORKS OF GWEN HARWOOD AND LARRY SITSKY

Alison J E Wood  
University of Adelaide  
2008

The following third party copyright material is to be removed from this thesis (all of the material is contained in Appendix A):

- Libretto, *Fall of the House of Usher*, pages 95-99
- Libretto, *Lenz*, pages 101-112
- Libretto, *Fiery Tales: A Comic Opera in One Act*, pages 114-125
- Libretto, *Voices in Limbo*, pages 127-132
- Libretto, *The Golem: A Grand Opera in Three Acts*, beginning page 134-152
- Libretto, *De Profundis*, pages 154-155

Other third party copyright material within this thesis is included with permission.

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 3.1 <i>Voices in Limbo</i> , composer's autograph, p2, line 1	29
Figure 3.2 <i>Voices in Limbo</i> , composer's autograph, p2, line 2	29
Figure 4.1. <i>De Profundis</i> , composer's autograph p3, Sitsky's instructions on staging,	55
Figure 4.2. <i>De Profundis</i> , composer's autograph, opening bars	55

## ABSTRACT

Gwen Harwood is one of Australia's most celebrated poets. Her longstanding collaboration with composer Larry Sitsky produced six substantial operas between 1963 and 1982; *Fall of the House of Usher* (1965); *Lenz* (1970); *Fiery Tales* (1975, based on Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and excerpts from Boccaccio's *Decameron*); *Voices in Limbo* (1977); *The Golem* (1980, first performed in 1993); and *De Profundis* (1982, a setting of Oscar Wilde's letters). Both Harwood and her critics acknowledge the libretti as some of her best writing (Harwood cites her libretto for *Lenz* as her 'selected poem'); to date, there has been no major study of these works.

This thesis engages with Harwood's opera texts, arguing for readings that are neither atomist nor reductive but jointly focused on both the effect of the text and the mechanics of its production. It begins by outlining the theoretical terrain of words and music studies and establishes an approach to Harwood and Sitsky's operas based on the idea that opera's textual exaggeration is a function of its multiple critical components; that is, the intersection of words and music, collaborative authorship, and dramatic language.

The thesis then offers focused studies of each of these aspects in Harwood and Sitsky's works, constructing a literary picture of the opera texts. Primary sources include the scores of the operas (usually copies of the composer's autograph), selected correspondence between Sitsky and Harwood, drafts and typescripts of the libretti (held in the National Library, Canberra, and the Fryer Library, University of Queensland), and selected essays by Harwood on her words for music.

## DECLARATION

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or 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, when deposited in the University Library, being available for loan and photocopying.

SIGNED:

DATE:

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks to the staff in the Manuscript Room at the National Library of Australia and the Fryer Library, University of Queensland; Opera Australia, Sydney; Sebastian Clark, Manning Clark House, Canberra; Kath McLean; and Antony Ernst for their generous assistance. I am also grateful to Professor Larry Sitsky for allowing me to view his papers at the National Library of Australia and to Dr John Harwood for granting access to Gwen Harwood's libretto and letters in Tony Riddell's papers, held at the Fryer Library, University of Queensland.

The Discipline of English at the University of Adelaide has allowed me the privilege of developing the ideas in this work through seminar presentations and papers; thanks particularly to Dr Phillip Butters, Associate Professor Tom Burton, Dr Dianne Schwerdt and Dr Lawrence Warner. I am also indebted to Mr Paul Wilkins, Deputy Librarian and Mr Ray Choate, Librarian, University of Adelaide, for our many lively conversations about Gwen Harwood.

Dr Heather Kerr has carefully supervised this project from its sketchy beginnings until completion: she has taught me the art of discernment and the value of patience. My thanks also to Christine Knight who has provided endless encouragement and the occasional cheer squad. Most of all I would like to thank my husband, Julian Cooling, without whose friendship, wit and dedication this project would have been very different.

Parts of this thesis have appeared in conference papers: 'Uneasy Libretti: Gwen Harwood and the Operas of Larry Sitsky' (*Symposium of the International Musicological Society*, Melbourne July 2004); 'Is this your Golem?: Retelling Textual History in the Operas of Larry Sitsky and Gwen Harwood' (*Writing Across Cultures: Annual Conference of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, Adelaide July 2005); 'From Libretto to Score: Textual Transformations in *Voices in Limbo*' (*Multimodal Texts: Engaging Sign Systems*, Portsmouth, UK, October 2005); 'Opera Crafting and the Manuscripts of Gwen Harwood and Larry Sitsky' (*Bibliographic Society of Australia and New Zealand*, Adelaide, October 2006).

Material contained in Chapter Three has been published as 'Operatic Narratives: Textual Transformations in Gwen Harwood and Larry Sitsky's *Golem* and *Lenz*'. *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature* 5 (2006) 179-191.

For Alison Gent, Douglas Muecke, Kevin Magarey,  
Graham Nerlich and Barbara Wall,  
who very kindly let me read poetry with them.