

PGO Newsletter No 3

December 2001

Dear Friends,

We are, frankly, amazed at the reactions of people to Pinchgut and the plans for the production of *Semele*. Everyone has been excited: "Just what Sydney needs", "We can't wait", "Since I heard about it, I've bought the CD and love the music". (Well, there were one or two who said "Opera? You'd better talk to the wife", but they'll come round.) We are glad that you think we are doing something worthwhile.

As you have probably bought your 2002 diary by now, please put in the dates of Pinchgut's performance of *Semele* in the City Recital Hall, Angel Place Sydney on 4, 6, 7 and 9 December 2002. Bookings for friends getting the Newsletter will open in May. But best keep all 4 dates free for now: you might want to see it more than once!

News

Last time, we announced that the role of Semele would be sung by Swedish-born, Sydney-educated and Manchester/Italy-resident soprano Anna Ryberg.

We are happy to announce two more soloists.

The joint role of Juno and Ino will be sung by Sally-Anne Russell, a glorious mezzo from Adelaide.

Jupiter will be Angus Wood, who you might know from Opera Australia productions as a leading baritone. Angus is retraining his voice and this will be his first role as a tenor. Profiles of Sally-Anne and Angus will be in the next newsletter.

This month's profile

Erin Helyard



Erin Helyard is the youngest member of the Pinchgut founding team. But this is not his first opera. In January, he was Assistant Musical Director, with Richard Tognetti, in the Sydney Festival production of Mozart's *Mitridate*.

Erin Helyard nearly became a historian. At high school, Ancient History was his best subject and he was fascinated with the ancient Greeks and their lives and their gods.

But an equal love of the harpsichord and the offer of the Lenore Buckle scholarship from the Sydney Conservatorium turned him towards music. His teachers included Paul Dyer, Ray Harvey, David Kinsela and Stephanie McCallum. Erin graduated from the Conservatorium with First Class Honours and the University Medal.

Since graduation, Erin has worked with the Australian Chamber Orchestra, the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra as well as Salut Baroque and other chamber groups. With Anna McDonald, Erin formed Sirius Ensemble which has presented numerous concerts in Sydney and has recorded a CD of Veracini sonatas on the Artworks label. Sirius will be the orchestra for Pinchgut's production of *Semele*.

Erin's interest in history has served him well as a musician. To perform a work, Erin needs to understand the times surrounding its composition. For some works, he has spent almost as much time in the library as at the keyboard. This ability has been very valuable to Sirius and Pinchgut. Erin's favorite period is the 18th Century and he can appreciate how *Semele* fitted into the London of the mid 1700s.

“The 18th Century” he says “seems to us to be very contemporary. It was the beginning of the modern world. People’s reaction to events and issues then was quite similar to our own reactions. That’s what makes opera of this era so fascinating: it is not hard for us to relate to what Handel was saying, through his music, about his times.”

Erin believes opera should be fun and not at all intimidating. “I sometimes think opera should be more like a jazz concert. The music and the performance should earn the audience’s attention. As audience members, we have inherited the 19th Century’s sense of piety and cultural devotion, sitting in concert halls as if we were in church. I don’t think this is appropriate for 18th century opera. It shouldn’t be a *rule* that people must be quiet at the opera but if the music and the performance are good enough, they will capture people’s attention.”

Erin plays the harpsichord and the fortepiano, as well as the chamber organ when necessary. His harpsichord is a copy of an Italian harpsichord with extended compass by Vincenzo Sodi of around 1750, made in 1999 by Colin Booth. It is the only one of its kind in the Southern Hemisphere and is perfect for performances of Handel.

In a later newsletter, Erin will talk more about *Semele*, its Greek origins, its 18th Century creation and its 21st Century relevance. He will also explain why its music sounds so wonderful today.

Marketing

Our budget for *Semele* includes money for a marketing programme, closer to the performance dates. But don’t expect to see prime-time television commercials. One of the principles we carved on the wall when we set up Pinchgut was to spend as much of our money as possible on the production: especially on the singers and musicians. Nevertheless, we do need to sell seats and to do that we need our potential audience to know about us. How often have you heard about a concert or read a review and thought: “Gee, I wish I’d known about that, I would have gone”. ?

Don’t let this happen to your friends.

We would like you to pass on the message to your friends or, even, to people who aren’t your friends but who might be interested. Tell them about Pinchgut and *Semele*. Tell them about the Newsletter. Ask them if you can pass their email address on to us. (We don’t add people to the list unless they have agreed.) If you can give us 5 names, and everyone does that we’ll be on the way to our box-office budget.

Will you help? We’re sure your friends will be grateful.

“Many a man has made his way into an honest girl’s bedroom by calling himself a god” *

In the next newsletter we’ll give you an outline of the *Semele* story. The libretto for Handel’s work was written by the poet William Congreve, based on Ovid’s version of a Greek, then Roman myth. Congreve wrote it originally for an opera composed by Eccles but as that opera was not performed, due to a business dispute, Handel borrowed the libretto. Got all that? Oh, and it is suggested that the story as written by Congreve was really about a certain highly placed royal mistress who had ideas above her station. And there are even echoes in a recent scandal involving a certain President of the USA. So you will find that *Semele* is not the dry-as-dust story that you might expect in opera.

*From Ovid’s version of the *Semele* story in *Metamorphosis*, translated by Mary M. Innes.

From all of us at Pinchgut, we wish you a great Christmas and holiday season. We are looking forward to the New Year: the year Pinchgut Opera really gets going!

Liz, Anna, Erin, Alison, Anna, Russell & Ken.

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