



June 2003

Dear Friends,

## Can you help?

Pinchgut Opera Limited is a non-profit company. We do not receive government support and we pay full commercial rates for use of City Recital Hall. Our only sources of income are ticket sales, commercial sponsorship and donations. Our first two productions – *Semele* and *The Fairy Queen* – have been underwritten by a group of music lovers, who have agreed to cover any shortfall in income over expenses. But we need to strengthen our financial position if we are to continue beyond the first two years. If you are able to help us with a donation, we would be very grateful.

The Pinchgut Opera Public Fund is on the Register of Cultural Organizations and is a Deductible Gift Recipient: gifts over \$2 are fully tax deductible. A receipt will be issued for your tax records. Under the law, we cannot promise any extra benefits to donors, other than acknowledgement in our newsletters and programmes, but we will do all we can to gratefully recognize our supporters.

Please send cheques to Pinchgut Opera Public Fund, PO Box 239 Westgate NSW 2048.

If you are in business and would like to talk about sponsorship, do get in touch. Sponsorship is dealt with under other tax provisions, so we can be very flexible in the benefits we offer. We are sure we can make sponsorship a good business investment for you. Call Anna Cerneaz on (02) 9362 5711 or 0412 093 063.

## News



We are delighted to announce that we have a new hotel sponsor in The Blacket Hotel. The Blacket is a 42-room boutique hotel that caters to the demands of both the corporate and holiday traveller. Located in the heart of Sydney's CBD and within a short walking distance to the City Recital Hall, the Blacket is a mix of old and new, showcasing a special and contemporary design in the presence of heritage architecture.

“Our association with Sydney's newest chamber opera company is exciting for us. As our hotel is entering a new phase of its development, we hope that our partnership with Pinchgut Opera will enable opera lovers to experience The Blacket, and those associated with us will learn to appreciate the art of Opera”, said James Bilios, Hotelier.

We thank The Blacket Hotel for their support and encouragement of Pinchgut, and look forward to a very happy association.

## Box office soon to open

In our next issue we'll be announcing the opening of the box office and a special deal for newsletter subscribers.

## News

- Following the great interest in the item in our last newsletter, we are pleased to report that Erin Helyard has announced that he will be going to McGill University in Montreal to study with Haydn scholar and keyboard player Tom Beghin. Erin will initially be studying for a Masters degree in performance, and then a PhD in opera also to be done at McGill. Erin has also just heard that he has been awarded a Sydney University Travelling Scholarship which, together with the Marten Bequest, will help him with travelling to Canada and getting set up over there. The Opera Arts Support Group has also awarded Erin money to crate and ship his harpsichord over to Montreal. Erin will be leaving at the start of September to begin his studies.
- Miriam Allan, who you may remember, is currently in the UK as Emma Kirkby's PA, recently sang in the finals of the the London Handel Competition, at Handel's Church in Hanover Square, and was the runner up! She sang Handel's Gloria, which was recently discovered in the extensive vaults of the Royal Academy of Music Library. Prizes include concert work in England.
- Meanwhile another of our artists Danny Yeadon is back in the UK where he will be playing with the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment for performances of Mozart's *Idomeneo* for Glyndebourne conducted by Simon Rattle.

## Artist profile : Jamie Allen

Anyone who went to see *Orpheus in the Underworld* this year will remember Jamie in his Gary Glitter outfit, and his athletic jumping. Jamie had a busy career with Opera Australia, and has done many interesting roles. Liz Nielsen spoke to him by phone in Melbourne.



Jamie is a country boy who grew up in Morpeth and Maitland, and who still likes to get away to the peace of the country when he can. He actually started his musical life as a flute player, playing in the Hunter Orchestra and also teaching flute. He found – when he started singing – that the breath control of a flute player was very useful and he was able to learn vocal technique with more speed because of that discipline.

Jamie began his singing career abruptly – “I heard that Opera Australia were auditioning for the apprentices in Richard Wagner’s *Meistersinger*. I knew I could sing but had no formal training, when I fronted up for an audition and

a part as an apprentice! It made me think that if I could get in without training, what could I do if I worked at it. There are many flute players but not many tenors.” He started working with the vocal coaches that came to the opera, like David Harper, whom he still works with whenever he gets the chance. In 1994 he joined the OA chorus and began to get a succession of roles with the company. This year he’s singing Lysander in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Kunz Vogelgesang in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, Arturo in *Lucia di Lammermoor* and the title role in *Orpheus in the Underworld*.

Living in Sydney, his wife and twelve year old daughter are also musicians, and Jamie composes music for the family trio. When asked what he would most like to do, Jamie replied, “I want to be able to have a career in Australia singing lyric tenor repertoire, Donizetti, Puccini and the lighter Verdi. I am not a Wagnerian singer. I want to sing here because Australia is a fantastic place to bring up our three kids.”

And when not singing? Astronomy, golf and cricket. We are delighted that Jamie will be singing with us this year,

## *The Fairy Queen* in Performance

As we explained in the last Newsletter, the score for *The Fairy Queen* went missing after its second production in 1693 and was not found until 1901. A few of the songs were known and were sung in the years between, but the work itself was a mystery. And it does not seem to have been missed much – Handel was the composer remembered from the English baroque period.

After its rediscovery, the first performance was in concert at Morley College, conducted by Gustav Holtz. Ralph Vaughan Williams was impressed with the score and persuaded publishers Novello (who were reluctant) to produce a vocal score. The war interrupted plans for a staged production. This eventually was realized in 1920 by the Cambridge University Musical Society – 227 years after the last time. The CUMS production seems to have used Shakespeare's words from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, cut to fit. It was successful and was revived several times.

The most famous modern production is one from Covent Garden in 1948. It was the first work from the new management at Covent Garden and was in fact a joint production of the Covent Garden Opera (as it was then called) and the Sadler's Wells Ballet.

“The performance of a national classic was indeed the appropriate symbol of a new enterprise, a proclamation of our faith in the greatest of English musicians” was how the Company saw it. It was also a brave move: to post-war English audiences, opera was Italian, with German permitted as a concession to Mozart's genius. To ensure success, the big guns were rolled out: Constant Lambert adapted the work and conducted the performances. Frederick Ashton (from the ballet company) directed and Michael Ayrton designed the scenery and costumes. The performers included Robert Helpmann as Oberon, Margot Rawlings as Titiana and a young Margot Fonteyn as a Spirit of the Air.

Much cutting and shaping was necessary, especially as it ended up rather more a ballet than an opera. Lambert notes, “One must always be prepared to make final and drastic revisions. At the first stage rehearsal the singer for *The Plaint* was unable to be present...I decided to omit it.” (We believe this aria is one of the loveliest in the opera and Sally-Anne Russell has recorded it for our sampler CD, so you will probably hear it on air before opening night.)

The 1948 production seems to have been a success, though it was not revived.

So far as we have been able to establish, there have only been two fully staged productions of *The Fairy Queen* in Australia. (If you know of another, please let us know). In the early 1970s Professor Roger Covell, with NIDA, staged a production in the Science Theatre at University of NSW. It used Purcell's music and masques and Shakespeare's words. As a result it was a very long show, though several people have told us no-one left before the end and it was worth it. We have asked Roger to let us have his recollections about the production and hope to include them in a Newsletter. The other was by The Song Company about ten years ago at the Goossens Hall at the ABC.

So far as we are aware, the only current production (other than ours) in the world is David Poultney's 1995 realisation for English National Opera. It omits the spoken dialogue and links the masques though dance. It is on DVD (with Yvonne Kenny) and was presented in Barcelona last year at the reopening of the Teatre del Liceu.

In the writings about *The Fairy Queen*, no-one has a good word for the words written in the original work to link the songs and masques. “A sad travesty” was ENO's Nicholas Payne's polite description.

So, modern productions either leave them out and use dance to link the masques or replace them with Shakespeare's poetry from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. We must say that we have no idea what we will do. We have given our director Justin Way an (almost) free hand. We are as curious as you are. We are sure, though that Justin's solution will be surprising and most entertaining.

It might sound trite, but we want our audiences always to leave the hall feeling that they have had a "beaut night out". We think we achieved that with *Semele* and are sure of a repeat with *The Fairy Queen*.

## The Handmaid's Tale – a Birds-eye view

Antony Walker has recently had a huge success conducting the North American premier of Poul Ruders' opera *The Handmaid's Tale* for Minnesota Opera this week. The New York Times described it as "dramatically convoluted, but so musically inventive that you get pulled in" and USA Today commented on its "shockingly contemporary resonance". Antony has been widely praised for pulling together the musical elements of the complex score and large orchestration.

We asked Antony about working on opera, and in particular a big premiere:

Conducting any opera is an extraordinarily overwhelming responsibility. And yet, no matter how hard one tries to convince oneself that the premiere of a contemporary opera should be exactly the same as any other performance, it isn't. Opera is a wonderful synthesis of many different art forms, but in the end music drives this particular synthesis. And where a piece is unfamiliar the music will have a lot of the power to determine if it is a success. You're also carrying the weight of expectations of the composer, the librettist, the director, the company even as only one part of a fantastic team. These are the things you try not to think about on opening night!

Poul Ruders, the Danish composer of *The Handmaid's Tale*, first read Margaret Atwood's novel in 1992, and was immediately convinced he should write it as an opera. Poul contacted Margaret and told her he had to write it and said if he didn't, he'd never write an opera again. Atwood agreed, Poul found a librettist (Paul Bentley), and got to work. Several years later, in March 2000, the opera had its world premiere in Copenhagen.



The opera is unusual in that Poul knew that he would have to write it in two languages; Danish for the Copenhagen premiere, and English for future productions that he hoped would come off. This was an incredible challenge for Poul, and meant that much of our work was really the first run of the English version. Two opera companies decided to do the work in 2003 - Minnesota Opera and ENO in the UK. ENO got in just before us - by a whisker. Their production was a revival of the Danish production (though now in English), and at Minnesota we had the opportunity to work on a completely new production.

I've conducted a lot of contemporary works; a lot of my early professional work and much of my training was in this area so I don't approach a contemporary score with much trepidation. But I must admit on first glance this was a challenge. The scores themselves (there were two volumes) were enormous and weighed 5 and a half kilos each. I had them out in Australia with me and had to take them as hand luggage when getting to Minnesota. Actually when I got to Minneapolis - a very long trip from Sydney - I was so tired that I left one of the scores on the plane. There aren't too many of these around, and after a sleepless night and a very early trip back to the airport I got it back.

Any rehearsal period of any opera is very intense, and *The Handmaid's Tale* was no exception. There are more than forty individual scenes, and we had a four week rehearsal period. The cast without exception were terrific, and very well prepared and we were all able to work together through the complexities of a new score. The story is extremely confronting and powerful, and is a shade too close to the realms of the plausible to be comfortable. I was astonished by the audiences' reaction to the piece - we had five almost sell out performances, and an incredible ovation each night. Though the story and the music were difficult, considerable effort had gone into informing and involving the audience in the months leading up to the opening. This effort was repaid as the audiences were very moved. So were the cast, crew and players - I almost wept at the end of the first performance it was so draining.



I'm very interested in the direction that contemporary opera is going as it mirrors works of the 17th and 18th centuries. After a number of operas based on social issues - like *Nixon in China*, *The Death of Klinghoffer* and *Dead Man Walking* - literary inspiration is back. Andre Previn has made an opera of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, there's *The Great Gatsby* by John Harbison, Mark Adamo's *Little Women* and the

children's classic *The Little Prince* has just opened in the US, with Teddy Tahu Rhodes as the pilot. And Poul is now working on an opera based on Kafka's *The Trial*.

I really hope Australia gets the chance to see *The Handmaid's Tale*, and I'm looking forward to the *Fairy Queen* very much.

Antony Walker

*The Handmaid's Tale* photos courtesy of Minnesota Opera

In July Musica Viva presents The Song Company in "Venetian Carnival" - a dizzying theatrical journey through the music of Venice's greatest composers, such as Banchieri, Vecchi, Croce, Gastoldi and Monteverdi. Venetian Carnival is being created as a live musical/theatrical experience by Rachel McDonald (director) and Roland Peelman and it's in Angel Place on the evenings of Saturday 12 July and Monday 21 July 2003. The show is also visiting Adelaide, Melbourne and Canberra. For more details please phone 8394 6666 or visit [www.musicaviva.com.au](http://www.musicaviva.com.au). Musica Viva is making available a 20% discount on full priced tickets in Sydney to Pinchgut Opera newsletter subscribers. Call the City Recital Hall Angel Place on 8246 2222 and quote "Venetian Carnival Special Offer".

That's it for now. Wishing you happy reading and listening.  
Liz, Alison, Anna C, Antony, Anna Mc, Erin & Ken.

Pinchgut Opera Ltd ABN 67 095 974 191  
Email : [liz@pinchgutopera.com.au](mailto:liz@pinchgutopera.com.au)  
PO Box 239 Westgate NSW 2048 ph. (02) 9518 1082 fax (02) 9572 8881

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Nicholas Payne, former Director-General, English National Opera.

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