



04 Newsletter No. 7

September 2004

Dear Friends,

City of Sydney Sponsorship of Pinchgut Opera

The City Council has decided to extend their 2004 sponsorship of \$20,000 to the same amount for 2005 and 2006. This is a very important sponsorship for Pinchgut Opera. We are proud to be recognised by the City of our birth.

What's Antony up to?

Conductor and Artistic Director Antony Walker is in Sydney for his last visit before being here for the *Orfeo* run. Antony is here to work with Sara Macliver and Sally-Anne Russell and Orchestra of the Antipodes on a recording of the Pergolesi *Stabat Mater*, which will be out next year. From Sydney Antony is going to Minnesota Opera to conduct performances of *Madam Butterfly*. While he is here he's going to be rehearsing with some of the singers for *Orfeo*, and is taking a chorus rehearsal.

Thanks to Holman Webb

Holman Webb, Solicitors, will sponsor the principal sackbut player, Nigel Crocker, who will play for their guests at a pre-opera function in their new Angel Place offices. From all of us, "thank you", Holman Webb and "welcome to the band of Pinchgut Opera supporters".

Would you like to sponsor an instrument?

We have had quite a lot of interest from people and companies wanting to sponsor an instrument in the orchestra. \$5000 will give you a principal player in a section of the band. The sackbut, the violone and one harpsichord have already gone but the cornetti (old trumpets), the chamber organ, the strings, lutes and baroque harp are still available. Meet the player (maybe a personal performance) and grateful acknowledgement in the programme. If you are interested, contact Liz Nielsen on 9908 1962 or liz@pinchgutopera.com.au.

A special offer for Pinchgut newsletter readers - Il Giardino Armonico in Sydney

After sell-out performances in 2002, Musica Viva is delighted to welcome Il Giardino Armonico back to Australia this October. Renowned for their exhilarating speed and virtuosity, it's easy to see why IGA are the renowned experts of Italian Baroque. Performing on period instruments, works include Biber, Durante, Vivaldi, Locatelli and CPE Bach. In celebration of the return of Il Giardino Armonico, Musica Viva is offering Pinchgut Opera newsletter readers a special 10% discount off ticket prices. Discounted adult ticket prices are \$65.70/\$54.90 and discounted concession ticket prices are \$57.20/\$47.80. Prices exclude booking fees and are subject to availability. Performances are on Sat 16 October at 8pm and Mon 18 October at 7pm at the City Recital Hall Angel Place. To book, please call (02) 8256 2222 and quote: *IGA 10% Special*.

Halcyon Concert

We'd also like to draw your attention to the last of the Halcyon concerts for this year. Halcyon is Alison Morgan and Jenny Duck-Chong, singers who you will know from *Semele* and *Fairy Queen*. The concert is on Saturday 23 October at 7.30 pm at the Music Workshop space at the Sydney Conservatorium. The program is called Dark Love and features works by Crumb, Harbison and Page. More info at 9705 0808.

L'Orfeo

City Recital Hall Angel Place, Sydney
1, 3 & 6 December 2004 at 7.30 pm
5 December 2004 at 5.00 pm
Tickets now on sale at 8256 2222 or
www.cityrecitalhall.com

Orfeo Synopsis

Many operas have stories that are very slight or even silly. One of the many amazing things about Orfeo is that even today we can still relate to and even see ourselves in the story. Happiness that is too good to last; one foolish instinct that spoils everything; the undying hope that some magic force will make everything come right in the end. So, if we allow ourselves to be taken up by what is happening to Orpheus, we will surely see things as relevant to the early 21st Century as they were to the early 17th Century. That, as well as the glorious music, makes it a great opera.

Prologue: The opera begins with a toccata played three times: probably the most rousing opening in the opera repertoire. It is thought that the toccata was to accompany the entrance of the Gonzaga family, in whose palace the work was first performed. La Musica (The Spirit of Music) welcomes the audience. She goes on to explain the magical powers of music. She asks for silence for the action that is to follow.

Act One: Nymphs and shepherds enter the fields of Thrace with Orpheus and Eurydice to celebrate their wedding day. There is singing and dancing. Orpheus sings a romantic aria to Eurydice, and then they exit to be married, accompanied by a beautiful chorus praying that their happy state bring no misfortune to the lovers.

Act Two: Orpheus returns to sing of the joys of the day. He sings of his miserable life before Eurydice married him. In the midst of this joyous gathering, La Messaggiera (the Messenger), enters with terrible news. (“Ah, bitter destiny! Ah, evil and cruel fate!”). She delivers the message that Eurydice has died. She goes on to explain the details of Eurydice's death (a snake bite), and how in her last breath she whispered, "Orpheus." Orpheus, first grieves, than resolves to rescue her from the underworld. He exits, and the chorus sings about the fragility of human happiness. The last part of this Act is one of the most moving scenes in all opera: with simple, restrained passion.

Act Three: Orpheus is accompanied by La Speranza to the entrance of Hades. She describes terrible things that face him. (“Abandon all hope, o ye that enter here”). Orpheus encounters Charon, the guard of Hades. He tries to convince Charon to let him pass with the magic of his singing. This aria is considered by some to be the centerpiece of the opera. It is certainly one of the most virtuosic in all opera. Though impressed by the music, Charon still does not let him in. Orpheus starts singing again, and begins to play his lyre—Charon is lulled to sleep and Orpheus passes him to enter Hades. The Act ends with a lovely madrigal-like chorus from the Spirits.

Act Four: Proserpina has heard Orpheus's music and is extremely moved. She begs her lover, Pluto, the head of the underworld, to release Eurydice. Pluto agrees, but only if Orpheus does not turn around to look at Eurydice until they have left Hades. (“Let him never turn his avid eyes upon her, For of everlasting loss, But a single glance would be the cause”). Orpheus begins the journey with Eurydice behind him. There is a loud noise behind; he looks back and Eurydice disappears. He tries to go after her, but unseen forces propel him back to the earth as the chorus sings of the dire consequences when passion overrules logic. (“Only he who can vanquish himself, Is worthy of eternal glory”)

Act Five: Orpheus is back in the real world and, consumed by his grief, denounces all other women. His father, Apollo, descends from the heavens to console his son. (“Too much, too much did you rejoice, In your happy condition, Now too much you mourn, Your bitter and hard fate”) He tells him that Orpheus will be taken to the sky and divine immortality. He will be able to see Eurydice again in the sun and the stars. Another lovely chorus accompanies their rise.

The Invention of Opera – Part One

Vocal music in many forms was the most widely practised form of music, but it was not used in the musically dramatic sense until the 17th century. It was around the year 1600 that opera came into being.

Opera began in Florence fostered by a group of scholars, philosophers, and amateur musicians called *camerata* (which means society). The group included the librettist Rinuccini and the composers Galilei, Cavaliere, Peri, and Caccini. They wanted to promote works with a single melodic line and simple accompaniment, inspired by ancient Greek drama. The earliest operas also took their plots from mythology, the legend of Orpheus and Eurydice being one of the most popular. Although fragments of Peri's *Dafne* (1597) exist, his *Euridice* (1600), is generally considered the first opera.

As this kind of drama is only possible because of the expressive qualities of music the early composers referred to their work as *dramma per musica* [drama through music]. Plots gradually developed from mythology into works about historical figures, and in time became separated into two strains of opera - opera seria (serious opera) and opera buffa (comic opera).

It wasn't until the appearance of Monteverdi in Venice that Italian baroque opera really emerged, and the art form became popular with larger audiences. In 1637 the first public opera house in the world opened in Venice, and by 1700 at least 16 more theatres were built and hundreds of operas produced. Two of Monteverdi's best-known works, *La Favola l'Orfeo* (1607) and *L'Incoronazione di Poppea* (1642), were extremely influential, and were responsible for the development of what we now call *bel canto* (beautiful singing). Monteverdi reflected the moods and drama of the libretto in his music, and his work became a model for the operatic composers who followed. Following Monteverdi was the next generation of Venetian composers, headed by Cesti, Cavalli and Stradella. In their operas the recitative became less important than the aria, the chorus gave way to the virtuoso soloist, and the Renaissance interest in myth and history was replaced by a trend toward lofty scenes punctuated by comedy.

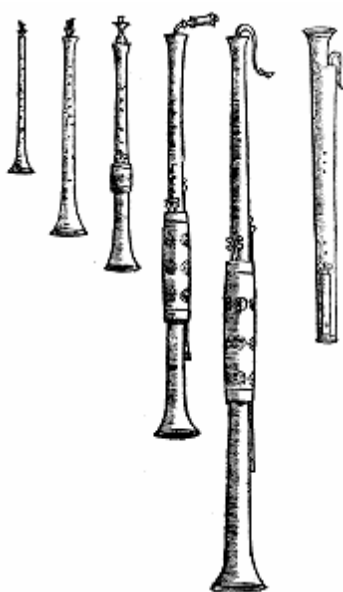
In the 17th and 18th centuries Naples became a centre for opera, particularly in the works of Scarlatti. Neapolitan opera saw the rise of *da capo* arias. In the typical *da capo* aria, the principal emotion is symbolized by a large opening main section, which is repeated, often in a heavily ornamented fashion, after a contrasting "B" section. Neapolitan opera became known as well for the importance it gave to comic opera. Comedy had maintained its place in the opera house mainly in the form of brief interludes, and now it came into its own, with such works as Pergolesi's *La serva padrona* (1733) and Paisiello's *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* (1782) The characters were from *commedia dell'arte* and the subject matter satirical, replacing the classical heroism of earlier operas. There was no spoken dialogue.

Meanwhile French opera officially began in 1669 with the establishment of the Académie royale de Musique, which was taken over by Lully in 1672. Italian opera, the pastoral, French classical tragedy, and the ballet were all antecedents of French opera. Lully introduced his audience to grand-scale entertainment; lavish stage settings and scenery in addition to ballets, choruses, and long diatribes on love and glory. His operas were divided into five acts and a prologue. After Lully, and following the pattern established by him, came composers like Rameau.

In England opera developed from masque: John Blow's *Venus and Adonis* was performed in 1685. The one great English opera composer of the 17th century was Purcell, and after his death England became a stronghold of the Italian opera style, particularly seen in the works of Handel. Between 1705 and 1738 Handel spent most of his musical energy composing operas. His first opera in England was *Rinaldo* (1711), an instant success, and among the many other operas he composed are *Giulio Cesare* (1724), *Rodelinda* (1725), and *Alcina* (1735). Handel's operas featured castrati who dominated this period and type of opera, sometimes forcing composers to write around them, adding music that had little or nothing to do with the plot. Additionally there were also some attempts at producing a ballad opera (a collection of well-known tunes interspersed in specially composed material) of which John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* is an example.

This is the briefest indication of the history of opera - there are many excellent books on the subject, including *A Short History of Opera* by Donald Jay Grout. Part two to follow in the next newsletter.

More instruments of the Baroque Band - the Curtal (and the Shawm)



To talk about the curtal which we are using in *Orfeo*, we're going to have to tell you about a family of instruments called the shawms, which are not used in the *Orfeo* band.

The shawm is a long, straight wooden instrument with a bell, played with a double reed similar to a small bassoon reed. Like many instruments, the shawm started life in Arabia. Instruments very much like the medieval shawm can still be heard in many countries today, played by street musicians or sometimes in bands. These would have been familiar to crusaders, who often had to face massed bands of saracen shawms and nakers (drums which were held at your waist), used to frighten opposing troops. It was obviously very effective as the shawm was quickly adopted in Europe for dancing and military purposes. The standard outdoor dance band in the fifteenth century consisted of a slide trumpet playing popular tunes, while two shawms improvised countermelodies over it – just like jazz today.

By the early 16th century, the shawm had changed a lot. Its harsh tone was softened by doubling its length (which modified the harmonics). When played in consorts of several sizes the shawm was standard for town bands or waits. These were originally night-watchmen, paid to keep watch on the walls at night, and equipped with shawms (which were cheaper than trumpets) to warn of danger. By the middle of the 16th century however players in the waits had developed considerable skill, and were now in demand for private functions.

The shawm band in this form lasted for about 100 years, and then in the middle of the 17th century fashions changed, and over a few decades, the soprano shawm acquired a narrower bore and keys. In the salons of the 18th century this appeared as the oboe.

Meanwhile, back in the early 16th century, it was quite obvious that a full consort of shawms was impossible for processions. The soprano shawm was about 70 cms long, with the lower instruments increasing in proportion up until the bass which had to be played with the edge of its bell resting on the floor. It was impossible to carry, let alone march with. German instrument builders devised a way of drilling two bores down a single piece of wood and joining them at the bottom, effectively producing a folded bass shawm which was half the original length, and much easier to manage. The new instrument was called either a curtal or a dulzian, and it became very popular as a general purpose bass instrument, even in bands where shawms weren't used. In the late 17th century, at the same time that the shawm turned into the oboe, the curtal underwent the same treatment and ended up as the bassoon.

Best wishes from the newsletter team – and don't forget to buy your tickets.
Alison, Ken, Liz, Anna C and Andrew.

“In my brother's music speech is the mistress of the harmony.” Giulio Cesare Monteverdi

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