National Themes in Australian Opera from Federation to the Bicentenary of European Settlement

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By

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INTRODUCTION

Background to the Present Study

From the earliest colonial times, Australian audiences have maintained an enthusiastic embrace of the genre of opera. This allegiance, however, has been dominated overwhelmingly by the patronage of performances of standard European operatic repertoire rather than by showing any significant encouragement of "home-grown" operatic composition.[1] Nevertheless, since colonial times, Australian composers have, remarkably, shown a significant and continuing interest in the composition of operas despite the limited performance outlets for their works. Perhaps because of this, a large proportion of Australian-composed operas has been of modest dimensions, since such performances as have occurred have been mostly limited to performing groups of meagre resources. Furthermore, only some of what is numerically a sizeable repertoire have ever been performed. Of these, few have received more than one brief "season" of performances at the time of their composition, after which they have been largely forgotten.

The aspect of this marginalised yet prolific operatic output relevant to the present study is the extent to which Australian opera composers have been attracted to specifically Australian subjects or settings that might suggest some aspiration towards a national school of operatic composition. It may be recalled that the emergence of nationalist schools of composition in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Europe involved composers identified as "nationalist" being attracted to national themes, especially in the genres of opera, ballet, song and orchestral programme music. These themes were commonly centred not only on the country's history, but also its distinct ethnic folklore, myth and legend. It is clear that Australia's transplanted European (and more recently multicultural) settler culture, by its very nature lacks such an indigenous ethnic identity. It may be that this is what has led some Australian composers to seek an Australian identity through references to Aboriginal myth and legend and/or to colonial (specifically rural) life, seen romantically through eyes largely located in an increasingly urban society. In the latter case, the production of "folk music" such as "bush ballads" etc. has of course been based on melodies often borrowed or adapted from European sources with newly written "Australian" texts. The question of the use of Aboriginal sources, seen by some as a guarantee of a distinctly independent Australian identity, is

likewise problematical and raises the issue of cultural appropriation; however, this aspect lay largely outside the perspectives of the Australian arts before the later twentieth century.

Perhaps in part reflecting the above dilemma relating to the creation of a national school of operatic composition, it may be observed that, until the middle of the twentieth century, the proportion of Australian operas on Australian subjects had been remarkably small. The present author has been initially indebted to Elizabeth Wood's comprehensive catalogue of Australian operas composed from colonial times up to 1970.[2] Wood lists some 43 operas from the colonial period,[3] of which only ten are set in Australia. During the first three decades of the twentieth century this proportion dropped even further. No less than 57 Australian operas from these years (including a number listed as incomplete or lost) are catalogued by Wood, of which only three have Australian settings. Since that time, however, the number of Australian-themed musico-dramatic works has risen significantly, to now comprise a substantial proportion of Australian-composed works for the lyric theatre.

The present book is devoted to a study of this repertoire during the period from Australia's foundation as a nation at Federation in 1901 until the Bicentenary of European settlement in 1988—two significant "watershed" dates in Australia's history. The works examined will be shown to identify a clearly defined Anglocentric perception of Australia's national identity on the part of its creators—librettists and composers. This perspective persisted throughout this period despite the later twentieth-century growth in multiculturalism, following the abandonment of the Eurocentric White Australia Policy and the embrace of multiculturalism in the policies of successive Australian governments since that of Gough Whitlam in 1972—as well as the granting of full citizenship to Australia's First Nation (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) peoples in 1967. Conversely, the period since the Bicentenary has witnessed a greater recognition of this growing cultural diversity in Australian society, as a result of which the nature of the country's national identity has become increasingly problematic. The debate surrounding this issue for the Australian arts has generated a considerable body of academic literature during the years since the Bicentenary.[4] In the field of post-Bicentennial operatic composition, such social and cultural diversity has been perceptively addressed in Michael Halliwell's monograph, *National Identity in Contemporary Australian Opera: Myths Reconsidered*.[5] Halliwell's analysis of a representative range of Australian-themed operas written since 1988 has prompted its author to directly confront this now increasingly complex question of national identity in the face of these operas' widely

varied social and cultural themes. There is also evidence of a more sophisticated addressing of cultural complexity in Australian literature prior to 1988; nevertheless, it will be seen that the scenarios of Australian-themed works for the musical theatre composed during the entire nine-decade period covered in this book retained relatively uncomplicated and conservative perceptions of national identity based on a monocultural Anglocentric perspective of Australia's history, society and culture inherited from its colonial period, together with essentially nineteenth-century concepts of nationalism. Rather than attempting further critical analysis and debate surrounding this issue, therefore, this book will chronicle the underlying approaches of successive librettists and composers to the treatment of national themes in their works during the period covered within its pages, and the nature and development of national consciousness arising from this fundamental frame of reference.

The repertoire to be examined in the following chapters came from the pens of two broad generations of composers. The most significant composers of the early to mid-twentieth-century generation who produced operas on Australian subjects include G. W. L. Marshall-Hall (1862–1915), Alfred Hill (1869–1960), Henry Tate (1873–1926), Margaret Sutherland (1897–1984), Clive Douglas (1903–1977), John Antill (1904–1986) and James Penberthy (1917–1999). A notable "absentee" here is the English-born Fritz Hart (1874–1949) who, despite his identification with an Australian national identity (which, however, he saw as being entirely British) as well as his prolific output of operas composed in Australia, wrote none with an Australian setting. The chief "second generation" composers of national-themed musico-dramatic works from 1960 to 1988 include Felix Werder (1922–2012), George Dreyfus (b.1928), Peter Sculthorpe (1929–2014), Richard Meale (1932–2009), Nigel Butterley (1935–2022), Roger Smalley (1943–2015), Barry Conyngham (b.1944) and Brian Howard (b.1951).[6]

Australian Operas (1901–1988): A Preliminary Overview

A number of distinct stages may be discerned in Australian operatic output during the period covered by this book. The first stage—up to the end of the 1920s—saw a remarkable upsurge in the composition of operas, and clearly the aspiration on the part of a number of composers towards a national school of opera. One indication of this was the abortive Australian Opera League, established in 1914 by Hart and Hill with the specific aim of encouraging the composition and production of operas by Australian composers. This venture, which had considerable institutional and even

government support, nevertheless foundered following the outbreak of the First World War. Despite this, during the 1901–1930 period, both Hill and Hart, along with a number of other composers, were particularly prolific in their output of operas. However, given the above-mentioned aspiration towards a significant "school" of Australian operatic composition, the almost complete avoidance of Australian settings amongst this huge operatic output needs some comment. A major factor in this decline from even the meagre "Australian" output during the colonial period may relate to what Geoffrey Serle has identified as a paradoxical falling off of nationalist aspirations in the decades immediately after Federation in all the arts during what he termed a period of "colonial dependence".[7] This stage will be examined in Chapter 1. Conversely, the marked increase in the number and proportion of operas on Australian subjects composed during the middle years of the twentieth century may be seen in the context of increasing calls during the 1930s and later for the development of a distinctly Australian musical culture.[8] During the remaining decades of this mid-century period, these calls resulted in a veritable spate of Australian-inspired works—especially orchestral descriptive or programmatic pieces and ballets (the most famous of these of course being Antill's ballet *Corroboree* (1936–44)) as well as operas by Douglas, Antill, Penberthy, Sutherland and others to be discussed in chapters 2–4. During the 1960s, over twenty musico-dramatic works—mainly short operas and works in the newly fashionable medium of "music theatre"—were created. Of these, however, only a minority were on Australian subjects. These included three by Sutherland, Antill and John Gordon (1915–1991)—older composers of the mid-century generation (composers treated in chapters 3 and 4), while a further work by the younger Adelaide composer David Gallasch (1934–2008) belongs stylistically to this group and is also treated in Chapter 4. As will be shown in Chapter 5, however, the new "second generation" of Australian composers (mentioned in the previous section) overwhelmingly endorsed international themes, as well as renouncing the more conservative musical styles of the earlier generation in favour of an embrace of post-Second World War European and American high modernism. During this decade, the only "Australian" works by this group of composers comprised a brief spate of three operas (including one full-length) by Dreyfus and a one-act opera by Werder. From the 1970s to the Bicentenary there was once more a significant stream of operas and music theatre pieces on Australian themes from the pens of this younger generation of composers, now writing within the more pluralist range of postmodern music styles (see discussion in Chapter 6). Of these, a notable group of works—including also a late opera by Penberthy—were composed in the mid-to-late 1980s, inspired

by—or actually commissioned in connection with—the Bicentennial celebrations. This late (and final?) flowering of Anglocentric nationalism will be surveyed in chapters 6–8.

The following chapters, then, aim to provide a comprehensive examination of the growing number of operas on Australian themes composed during the nine decades from Federation to the Bicentenary. These will be examined in their historical and artistic context with specific reference to the nature of their subjects and the treatment of both their libretti and musical settings. It is hoped that this approach may yield insights into both the nature and development of national consciousness in these works as well as their significance in the wider development of Australian art music during the period.

Notes

[1] The history of Australian involvement with opera from colonial times through the period covered by this book is dealt with comprehensively in Chapter 8 "Australians and Opera" in Roger Covell, *Australia's Music: Themes of a New Society* (Melbourne: Sun Books, 1967; second edition, Melbourne: Lyrebird Press, 2016).

[2] Elizabeth Wood, "Australian Opera, 1842–1970: A History of Australian Opera with Descriptive Catalogues" 2 vols. (PhD dissertation, University of Adelaide, 1979). NB—All subsequent text references to "Wood's Catalogue" in this book refer to Vol. 2: "Catalogue No.1: Operas Written in Australia 1842–1970" (1–226) and will not be separately footnoted.

[3] Wood's catalogue of colonial operas is restricted to those designated as "operas" or "operettas", as well as some plays with extended music ("semi-operas"), but excludes a large number of colonial period musical plays and pantomimes etc. listed in a separate catalogue. Nevertheless, these "main catalogue" operas—with few exceptions—follow the then popular English format of spoken dialogue with set musical numbers.

[4] The idea that the Bicentenary provoked fundamental reassessments of the ideology of "national identity" in Australia is pursued in Stephen Castles et al., "The Bicentenary and the Failure of Australian Nationalism", Occasional Papers No.5, Centre for Multicultural Studies, University of Wollongong, 1987: 18–34. A notable contribution to the wide-ranging contemporary debate on national identity is Simon Sleight, "Pulling 'That Aching Tooth': The Peculiar Case of Australian 'National Identity'", *Australian Studies* 20 (2005): 117–138.

[5] London: Routledge, 2018.

[6] Here the considerable operatic output of Australian-born Malcolm Williamson has not been included since his stage works were created as an expatriate residing in England.

[7] Geoffrey Serle, *From Deserts the Prophets Come: The Creative Spirit in Australia 1788–1972* (Melbourne: Heinemann, 1973), 89.

[8] For example, Jennifer Hill refers to an article by Thorold Waters in the magazine *The Listener In* of 16 February 1937 calling for the recently established ABC to "foster a distinct national creative school", while she also comments that the ABC had previously (1933) declared its aim to "lay the foundations of an essentially 'national' musical literature". See Jennifer Hill, "Clive Douglas and the ABC: Not a Favourite Aunt", in *One Hand on the Manuscript: Music in Australian Cultural History 1930–1960,* ed. Nicholas Brown et al. (Canberra: Humanities Research Centre, Australian National University, 1995), 238–239.

CHAPTER ONE

OPERA DURING THE PERIOD OF "COLONIAL DEPENDENCE" (1901–1930)

Background Perspectives

It will be recalled from the Introduction that several distinct phases are discernible in the development of national themes in Australian operatic composition during the period covered by this book. The first phase—to be addressed in this chapter—covers the years from Federation to the end of the 1920s, and has been seen by a number of commentators on Australian society and the arts generally as being dominated by an overriding identification of Australia in terms of its place as part of the (then) British Empire rather than as an emerging independent nation proud of its own individual identity. This situation has been vividly and succinctly perceived by Geoffrey Serle who, as noted in the Introduction, dubbed this period as a "perpetuation of colonial dependence"[1] and, ironically, a period retreating from the strong upsurge of national aspirations in the twenty years or so prior to its achievement of nationhood at Federation. Serle writes of Australia during the early post-Federation decades thus:

> The educated middle class, with few exceptions, was content to import culture like other consumer goods and had minimum contact with any living creative culture. There were immense advantages in the sense of being involved, however remotely, as part of a great metropolitan culture; but one of the great tragedies of being colonial is the customary fawning on the metropolis and automatic disbelief in and neglect of local endeavour.[2]

There were, it is true, some relatively isolated "islands" of national consciousness during these years; however, such expressions were largely ignored or denigrated in the prevailing conservatism of both majority critical opinion and also popular taste. Serle comments further:

> Australian taste in the arts was now utterly conservative and backward—the product, it seemed, of growing isolation and a wider time-lag of ideas than in the nineteenth century.[3]

Before turning to an examination of Australian composers' operatic output during this period, a brief survey of contemporary trends in painting, literature and the theatre will serve to provide some background to this endeavour by giving an overall profile of Australian artistic achievement in the sister arts surrounding operatic production during these years.

Perhaps the most striking "volte face" from late colonial nationalism occurred in the visual arts, where, "paradoxically, the birth of Australia as a nation coincided with the dispersal of her best-known artists".[4] The exodus of these artists can be seen to be in part a result of the 1890s depression in Australia and the collapse of the local market for their art, but equally (and more importantly) the result of the lure of studying and working in London and Paris as the great fountainheads of European art. Nearly all the artists of the so-called "Heidelberg School" of Australian impressionists emigrated either permanently or for much of the period covered by this chapter. They include: Tom Roberts (1856–1831; expatriate from 1903–1923); David Davies (1864–1939; expatriate from 1897); Emmanuel Philips Fox (1865–1915; expatriate from 1903); Arthur Streeton (1867–1943; expatriate from 1898–1924); and Charles Conder (1868–1909; expatriate from 1890). Their paintings, not surprisingly, now largely concentrated on European subjects—portraits and scenes. The only major "Heidelberg" artist to remain in Australia and continue the Heidelberg tradition was Frederick McCubbin (1855–1917). Notable post-Heidelberg artists such as Max Meldrum (1875–1955—in Europe from 1900–1912) as well as many minor artists, tended also to reject the Heidelberg artists' concentration on portraying the Australian landscape and to follow the now more fashionable "cosmopolitan" subjects. The most notable Australian landscape impressionist during the post-Heidelberg period was Hans Heysen (1872–1968).

In literature, the same turning away from late nineteenth-century nationalism is apparent among the generation of writers active during the early post-Federation period. In the late colonial period, the most striking upsurge of nationalism may be seen in the work of the host of so-called *Bulletin* writers[5]—poets and short story writers, the most famous being A. B. ("Banjo") Paterson (1864–1941) and Henry Lawson (1867–1922). The subject of their work was overwhelmingly "the bush", the "outback" and the hardy Australian bushman—treated both romantically and nostalgically, and also using much colloquial language. The most notable novelists, writing of the harshness of Australian colonial life, were Thomas Browne ("Rolf Boldrewood") (1826–1915), Joseph Furphy ("Tom Collins") (1843–1912) and Marcus Clarke (1846–1841) who wrote the most famous novels

of colonial Australia—respectively *Robbery Under Arms* (1887–1888), *Such is Life* (1896) and *His Natural Life* (1874).

The sudden rejection of national themes during the early post-Federation period is strikingly shown in the work of the most significant writers of the next generation. Indeed, the state of Australian literature in the earliest post-Federation years was vividly portrayed by Vance Palmer (1885–1959) who, together with his wife, Nettie (1885–1864), were two of the most prominent critics of Australian literature in the first half of the twentieth century. As early as 1905, the young Vance Palmer was lamenting the lack of national themes in Australian literature. In an article titled "An Australian National Art" published in *Steele Rudd's Magazine* (January 1905), he began by repeating a conversation in a previous issue of the magazine between "an author, an artist and an actor. Their conversation was of Australian art, and their verdict was unanimous that Australians were [by then] indifferent to the representation of their life in art".[6] Palmer himself commented further:

> We, who have in our power the makings of a glorious nation with no sordid past, such as the legacies of most countries, are content to imitate the customs of old degenerate nations, and to let our individuality be obscured by the detestable word 'colonial'. Under such conditions our art must suffer.[7]

The poets of the early post-Federation period include most notably Christopher Brennan (1870–1932), John Shaw Neilson (1872–1842) and Hugh McCrae (1876–1958). These poets looked to European artistic models for inspiration—from classical Greek mythology and Medieval romance to French symbolism. As to prose fiction, the only great Australian novelist of the early twentieth century was Ethel ("Henry Handel") Richardson (1870–1946) who, although treating Australian social themes in her famous trilogy *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* (1917/1925/1929), was nevertheless an expatriate from her teenage years, residing in England from 1887 and virtually unknown throughout her life in her native land. Conversely, the most significant Australian-themed novel written in Australia during the 1920s was D. H. Lawrence's *Kangaroo* (1923), written during Lawrence's brief stay in the small NSW town of Thirroul, south of Sydney. *Kangaroo* is widely recognised as a most notable influence on the awakening of national consciousness among post-Federation Australian writers of fiction—an issue that will be further pursued in Chapter 3 with respect to the efflorescence of Australian-themed novels in the following decades.

Returning to the poets of the period, a significant—if isolated—nationalist "flame" survived in the writings of Bernard O'Dowd (1866–1953). O'Dowd wrote before 1900 for *The Bulletin* and strongly shared its nationalist ideals, including a romantic socio-political radicalism. This

idealism carried throughout his career into the new century, its most famous expression being the long poem *The Bush* (1912). In this poem, written in high-flown Victorian language and full of mythical and classical allusions, O'Dowd's romantic depiction of "the bush" extends into a new philosophical and visionary image of a

> Great Australia [which] is not yet. She waits …
> She is the scroll on which we are to write
> Mythologies our own and epics new …
> Love-lit, her Chaos shall become Creation;
> And dewed with dream her silence flower in song.

O'Dowd's *Bulletin*-inspired "bush" romanticism now also carried prophetically the notion that Australia's national awareness (to come) was inseparable from the landscape itself and its Indigenous inhabitants. Inspired by his researches into the early anthropological studies of Sir Baldwin Spencer and F. J. Gillen, the poem carries an allusion to the Aboriginal "dreamtime" or "Alcheringa" in which was found "the Golden Age"—a position closely foreshadowing that of the "Jindyworobak" writers (see Chapter 2). O'Dowd's vision of a (future) Australia here also will be seen to resonate with the fantasy scenarios of Alfred Hill's opera *Auster* and Henry Tate's *The Dreams of Diaz* to be examined later in this chapter.

Turning finally to the theatre, the medium closest to opera, Serle points out[8] that theatre production post-Federation was dominated by the monopolistic commercial companies of J. C. Williamson and J. and N. Tait, who were concerned with producing only box-office successes. These comprised largely light plays and musicals. Serious dramas included only sporadic productions of plays by English and European dramatists such as Shakespeare, Shaw, Yeats and Synge as well as Ibsen, Chekhov and Pirandello. Australian plays were confined to light comedies, farces and musicals such as the adaptation of C. J. Dennis's (1876–1938) comic poem *The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke* (1915), as there was a strong prejudice against the idea that Australia could be the proper setting for any serious drama. This situation began to change only by the 1920s with the advent of the later plays of Louis Esson (1878–1943), such as his highly-praised play *The Drovers* (1922). Hitherto Esson had confined himself to comedies on Australian themes in plays such as *The Time is Not Ripe* (1912). Esson was strongly influenced by his contact with the contemporary Irish dramatists, especially W. B. Yeats. Esson first met Yeats in 1905, and his association with Yeats and the Irish Literary Movement (or "Celtic Twilight") continued into the 1920s. It was Yeats who urged Esson to concentrate upon national themes in order to create a genuine Australian drama, following the

national-themed plays of Yeats and Synge and the Abbey Theatre dramatists. Esson was inspired by Yeats as can be seen by a series of letters he wrote to Vance Palmer in 1920–1921.[9] This spurred the two writers to create a repertory company in Australia similar to the Abbey Theatre company, called The Pioneer Players. Although the company was not ultimately successful, it can be seen as part of a genesis of serious Australian drama in future years—Esson in fact being dubbed "the Father of Australian Drama".

The above brief survey has attempted to sketch a picture of Australian artistic development in the visual arts, literature and theatre during the first three decades of the twentieth century, as a background to viewing operatic activity during these years. The operatic scene, as will now become apparent, was one that contained even less evidence of national consciousness than that found in its isolated manifestations in the other arts.

Australian Composed Opera 1901–1930: An Overview

The general rejection of Australian subjects for serious art in the early post-Federation period is, as noted in the Introduction to this book, reflected in the tiny proportion of Australian-themed operas—only three out of a vast repertoire of both completed and incomplete operas by Australian composers—during the first three decades of the twentieth century. However, unlike the situation in painting and literature, there was no strong pre-Federation nationalist phase in the composition of opera. Rather, following trends in the colonial theatre arts generally, colonial operas—including the few on Australian themes—were largely lightweight comedies, farces or else melodramas or fantasies.

During the colonial period, the bulk of Australian-composed operas in any setting were written after 1860 and the majority of these in the years surrounding the Centenary of European settlement in 1888. Of the approximately 35 operas written during this period, only five are recorded in Wood's catalogue as being all-sung, while of these, two were unperformed and a further two only heard in concert performance. This reflects the overwhelming tendency of Australian composers of the colonial period to follow the contemporary English fashion for comedies or romances in the operetta format comprising musical numbers and spoken dialogue—a trend both fostered as well as reinforced by the apparent reluctance of producers and theatre companies to commission or stage "serious" Australian-composed operas of the all-sung type. This contrasts with the widespread performance and popularity of the standard European operatic repertoire in the Australian colonies during the same period, in

productions given by the host of both touring and "naturalised" opera companies, as chronicled by Roger Covell.[10] A small number of serious Australian-composed musical dramas that were all (or mostly) sung throughout sprang rather from the imported English and German choral traditions and took the form of concert-performed (often "occasional") oratorios, cantatas or choral odes on sacred or secular (notably historical) subjects, and performed by the host of amateur choral societies and "liedertafels" active during the later colonial period. This repertoire included two notable works on Australian historical themes, namely Charles Horsley's (1822–1876) *The South-Sea Sisters,* an "occasional" piece written for Melbourne's Intercolonial Exhibition in 1866; and John Delany's (1852–1907) *Captain Cook* (1888), written in connection with the Centenary of European settlement.[11] This "dramatic cantata" approach to musical drama—also featuring historical/visionary Australian themes—was to be notably echoed in the later post-Federation period in Alfred Hill's *Auster* and Henry Tate's *The Dreams of Diaz*, as will be discussed in the last section of this chapter.

Meanwhile, the first decade of the post-Federation period witnessed an upsurge in operatic production by a large group of mainly minor composers, mostly continuing the preferred scenarios and operetta format of the colonial period mentioned above. No less than 19 operas have been identified from these years, of which four were incomplete, seven unperformed and the scores of nine lost. None were on Australian subjects. All but two were comic operas in the operetta mould, a number reflecting the then widespread popularity of the operas of Gilbert and Sullivan and other English operas of the same ilk. The most significant operas of the decade were composed by Alfred Hill, G. W. L. Marshall-Hall and Ernest Truman (1869–1948). Hill's three operas, *Tapu* (1902), a "Maori comic opera", *Don Quixote de la Mancha* (1904) (unperformed) and *A Moorish Maid* (1905) (the latter two "romantic comedies") were all written in the prevailing operetta style. The remaining two notable dramatic works—both on serious subjects—were Truman's *Mathis* and Marshall-Hall's *Aristodemus* (both 1902). Truman's opera is listed by Wood as a "music drama";[12] however, it is unclear as to whether the work was all-sung and if so, whether through-composed or in a number format, since the score has been lost. Marshall-Hall's *Aristodemus* (unperformed), by contrast, may be seen in part to owe something to the earlier-mentioned choral tradition, being a work with a spoken text for actors, delivered over a musical score comprising continuous choral and orchestral numbers in the style historically known as "melodrama" (here referring to the dramatic use of musically accompanied speech popular in the late eighteenth and early

nineteenth century and surviving during the Victorian period and in a number of works in the early twentieth century).

The second and third decades of the twentieth century witnessed a significant shift in the character of Australia's native-composed operatic repertoire. These years covered the advent of the First World War and its aftermath, of which many writers have debated the effects of Australia's participation in the war in the divided terms of its fostering either a sense of national independence or else Empire solidarity. In any case, the war spawned a growing popular perception of Australia to be now seen as a proud unified nation under both its national flag as well as the Union Jack. This conflicted emergence of national consciousness was only gradually to lead to a more tangible emphasis on an independent Australian artistic expression, mainly after 1930 as will be traced in subsequent chapters. During the previous period, at least in opera, overt evidence of this, as reflected in a serious engagement with Australian settings and dramatic operatic subjects, nevertheless remained absent—with the exception of the three isolated examples to be examined at the end of this chapter.

Overall, the 1910s and 1920s saw, in addition to the continued appearance of light operetta-type works, a significantly new emphasis on the composition by Australian composers of all-sung (including through-composed as well as number) operas on serious—historical, legendary, exotic and even Biblical—subjects. During these years the most notable output of completed and performed operas came from the pens of arguably Australia's three most prominent composers of the period—namely G. W. L. Marshall-Hall, Fritz Hart and Alfred Hill. Of these, Hill's operas for the most part followed the traditional paths of the late colonial composers, while the English immigrants, Marshall-Hall and Hart, especially the latter, may be seen as the central figures in this sudden upsurge of through-composed music dramas. This can be seen to reflect the influence on their early development of the enthusiasm, among the more progressive of their fellow English composers, for the music of Wagner—and more widely that of the "New German School".[13] For Marshall-Hall and Hart, the Wagner influence centrally involved a strong preference for the music drama model in their stage works. During these years, however, few of these more progressive operas achieved performance despite the growing attraction to this format by a number of composers. For English-language operas, the overwhelming preference even then, among the public and theatrical producers, was still for the more traditional operetta form, with numbers and spoken dialogue. The operas of Marshall-Hall, Hart and Hill will now be discussed briefly in light of both their musical style and structure, and also, the issue of their

composers' claims to any sort of Australian allegiance or identification in their work—philosophical, spiritual or artistic.

G. W. L. Marshall-Hall

George William Louis Marshall-Hall was born in London in 1862. His formal musical training was sketchy and included only a brief term at the Royal College of Music where Hubert Parry was his composition teacher and thought highly of his potential. By 1890, he had achieved much acclaim in England as an important emerging musical talent, and when he applied for the post of foundation Ormond Professor of Music at the University of Melbourne, his application was enthusiastically endorsed by none other than Sir George Grove, the first Director of the RCM and founder of the famous *Dictionary of Music and Musicians*.

Marshall-Hall's life and work, including his notable but turbulent career in Melbourne from 1891 until his death in 1915, has been chronicled in detail by Warren Bebbington[14] and Therese Radic,[15] while Peter Tregear[16] has also written perceptively on his career and impact on Australian music. As with the operas of Hart and Hill, what is significant for the present book is the character of Marshall-Hall's operatic output and its composer's relationship with any concept of an Australian national allegiance.

Marshall-Hall wrote only three dramatic works classified as operas in Melbourne: *Aristodemus* (1902), already discussed;[17] *Stella* (1910); and *Romeo and Juliet* (1912). Of these, *Stella* is of primary interest as the first "serious" opera (all-sung) with an Australian setting and will be examined in some detail in the last section of this chapter. The composer had written several operas in England prior to his emigration, and all—reflecting his life-long admiration for Wagner—are cast as through-composed music dramas. Although, throughout his period in Australia, Marshall-Hall never relinquished the view that "Wagner's music-dramas were the supreme musical forms,"[18] the chief influences on his later operatic style were—in addition to Wagner—those of Strauss, Debussy and Puccini, most notably the latter. The influence of Puccini was significantly intensified after he attended a performance in Melbourne of *Madama Butterfly* in 1909. Bebbington has summarised the profound shift of emphasis in Marshall-Hall's aesthetic at this time as follows:

1. In modern German music, sensuous effect has replaced poetical feeling. Only Puccini has achieved emotional intensity.
2. Puccini's music has the depth of Wagner expressed directly and simply, without endless probing and analysis.

3. The future of music is in the combination of Italian clarity with German depth and imagination. Australia, with its Northern heritage and Mediterranean climate is an ideal location for such a meeting.[19]

Marshall-Hall's new-found enthusiasm for Puccini was to be followed up in the composition in 1910 of his opera *Stella* as will be further discussed later. The Puccini influence remained in his final opera, *Romeo and Juliet*. It was in his early opera *Harold* (composed in England in 1888), that Marshall-Hall had come closest to the Wagnerian ideal of a through-composed music drama with no identifiable numbers, based on a network of leitmotifs comprising its major thematic substance.[20] In these two last Australian operas, however, the later Puccini influence is reflected in the loosening of structure along more Italian lines, where there are observable numbers woven into the overall through-composed fabric, while the thematic treatment has retreated to the use of a number of "reminiscence" themes, with much of the music independent of these. This will be further examined with regard to *Stella* in due course.

As to Marshall-Hall's credentials as an Australian composer, the most outward manifestations of an Australian identification in his music are the occasional *Australian National Song*, for choir and piano, written for the Melbourne Liedertafel in 1899, and of course the opera *Stella*. Additionally, among the composer's literary works is the *Hymn to Sydney* (1897*)*, a "rambling effervescence of praise for that city".[21] This set of poems was inspired by the composer's friendship with the Heidelberg artists, in particular Arthur Streeton. Bebbington states that this association brought forth extended discussions regarding the nature of art and a mutual influence, leading to the composer's aspiration to identify with the spirit of the Australian landscape and culture as a means of artistic renewal.[22] While this did not manifest in the subjects of the vast bulk of Marshall-Hall's music, which remained exclusively European, the composer's association with the Heidelberg painters can be seen to be the most notable influence on his attitude to his adopted country. Marshall-Hall had spent periods with the painters during some of their camping holidays; in particular, a stay in one of these camps in Sydney in 1891 was the genesis of both the *Hymn to Sydney* some six years later and his Symphony in Eb, completed in 1903. For the latter, Marshall-Hall wrote a programme note that is the most complete statement of his feeling of identification with Australia:

> The symphony was originally conceived of a summer holiday [sic] whilst camping out in Sydney Middle Harbour with a couple of congenial comrades. I found that in it I had unconsciously gathered together as a harmonious whole the many heterogenous [sic] impressions of Australian

> life and scenery which my stay in this country had engendered. Hence its buoyant cheerful tone. For what have we Australians, in this fresh unattempted land which absorbs all our energies, to do with the self-questionings, the too often morbid introspectiveness, that the gloomy climate and cramped-life conditions of our English ancestral home more and more tend to induce? Here we grow up under a genial Southern sun, amid an environment which makes it a delight merely to be alive. In every direction new paths open before us. Our every faculty, every energy, finds countless fields for healthy exertion. For us the world is only beginning.[23]

It is noteworthy that Marshall-Hall's sentiments were significantly formed during the last decade of the pre-Federation years, in the context of the previously discussed nationalist aspirations of late colonial art and literature. That they were at least maintained through to the later pre-First World War years may be inferred from the evidence of *Stella* and his previously quoted comments upon the complementary nature of "Teutonic" and "Mediterranean" arts, with the observation that Australia was an ideal location for such an art to flourish. In the case of Fritz Hart, the encounter and subsequent engagement with Australia was to come some two decades later than that of Marshall-Hall and formed a major influence upon Australian operatic composition during the second decade of the twentieth century and beyond.

Fritz Hart

Fritz Bennicke Hart was born in London in 1874 and studied at the Royal College of Music from 1893–1896. During these and later years in England he formed notable friendships with (among others) Holst, Vaughan Williams and Ireland, who were the basic influences on Hart's musical style and language. Hart's early career was as a conductor of various theatre orchestras, and it was in this capacity that he was engaged by the J. C. Williamson Company touring Australia in 1909. What was intended as a 12-month contract was extended to three years, and his extended stay led to Hart assuming the posts of Director and chief composition teacher at Marshall-Hall's Albert Street (later Melba) Conservatorium. In the latter role Hart was the teacher of a large group of (notably female) composers, including Margaret Sutherland and Peggy Glanville-Hicks. Hart remained in Melbourne until 1937 in his roles at the conservatorium as well as various conducting posts, after which he was appointed as foundation professor of music at the University of Hawaii and conductor of the Honolulu Symphony Orchestra; he then remained in Hawaii till his death in 1949.[24]

If Marshall-Hall's primary musical inspiration was continental European, Hart's was overwhelmingly English. Furthermore, Hart retained a fierce allegiance to English music and saw it as the essential foundation for an Australian musical art as can be seen both in his own musical compositions, the vast bulk of which were created in Australia, and also, pronouncements on what he saw as the nature of an "Australian" music. His fierce conviction that Australia's music should be "British" had been set forth in 1915 in two reports published in the journal *Australian Musical News*.[25] Hart later became vice-president of the newly-formed Australian chapter of the British Music Society, set up in Melbourne in 1921 by Louise Hanson-Dyer as a defiant statement of Australia's solidarity with Britain and the Empire, and in sympathy with the anti-German sentiments surrounding the First World War. Within this context, however, Hart can be seen to have developed as strong an identification with Australia as did Marshall-Hall. An early indication of this identification can be seen in 1913 in his co-founding with Alfred Hill of the Australian Opera League (mentioned in the Introduction) which had as its primary aim to foster a new Australian national school of opera composition. As has been noted, this venture was an abortive one, but even here it is notable that the only two operas that were given under the League's aegis and national aspirations—namely Hart's *Pierrette* and Hill's *Giovanni the Sculptor*—had no Australian connection in their subjects. Anne-Marie Forbes has suggested, however, that they "reflected an expansive view of Australian opera; that works composed in Australia were necessarily Australian, irrespective of their subject matter".[26]

Hart's music, nevertheless, did not completely lack Australian themes. His voluminous output overall was largely of vocal music—especially solo songs and choral music as well as operas. Among the more than 500 of his songs were at least two sets that were settings of poems by Australian poets, composed even prior to his association with the Australian Opera League. These include three songs to ballads by W. H. Ogilvie (1909) for chorus and string orchestra and six settings of poems by Louis Esson for voice and piano (1912). The poems were set in colonial times and were essentially "bush" poems, while "the bush" as an iconic symbol of Australian identity was later to be treated in one of Hart's few extended orchestral works, *The Bush* (1923), inspired by O'Dowd's poem discussed earlier. Forbes relates that this work actually had its origins in a project to write an opera on an Australian subject—a venture that never bore fruition.[27] She quotes from an interview that Hart gave at the much-delayed première of movements from the work for an ABC composers' competition in 1933. Hart's comments here indicate something of his attraction to his adopted country on a spiritual

level, but his rejection of the more overt or fashionable manifestations of nationalism. In this interview Hart stated that the five-movement suite developed from music composed for an aborted collaboration with his friend Louis Esson to produce an opera based on an Aboriginal legend "with a supernatural element in it", illustrating Hart's love of nature mysticism rather than the "slip-rails and gumleaves and all that sham Australian sentiment".[28]

Esson, it will be recalled, was a poet and playwright whose love of nature mysticism was inspired by the "Celtic Twilight". Hart shared Esson's love of this literary movement, which he had first encountered during his student days in England. Hart's Celticism was also inextricably bound up with his early identification with the Celticism of Wagner's later music dramas, *Tristan and Isolde* and *Parsifal*. Tregear mentions Hart's initial encounter with Wagner's music via the Prelude to *Tristan*, which Hart is said to have "lapped up like mother's milk".[29] This identification with both Wagnerism and Celticism is reflected in the preferred "music drama" format of a significant number of his Australian operas as well as of a group of these based on subjects from the "Celtic Twilight". These include three based on plays from this movement, namely *The Land of Heart's Desire* (after Yeats, 1914), *Riders to the Sea* (after Synge, 1915) and *Deirdre of the Sorrows* (after Synge, 1916). None of these, however, received performances during Hart's lifetime, though several of his more conventional operas did. Several later operas were to Hart's own libretti based on plots he devised from these literary themes,[30] and just one—*Deirdre in Exile*—actually achieved a production, in 1926. Though, finally, Hart was never to write an opera on an Australian subject, these through-composed operas were influential as the now preferred format for Australian composers writing operas on serious subjects which were emerging for the first time during these years.

Alfred Hill

Marshall-Hall and Hart may be said to have led the most progressive trend in the development of Australian opera during the post-Federation period. Nevertheless, the operas of Alfred Hill composed during the 1910s and 1920s, while continuing the link to colonial traditions displayed in most of his operas, nevertheless were influenced by the trend towards more continuous opera during these years. Born in Melbourne in 1869, Hill's childhood and youth were spent in New Zealand, where he returned after his overseas study in Leipzig in the late 1880s. Although the next 20 years involved frequent travel between Australia and New Zealand, mainly as a

conductor, it was only from the years immediately before the First World War that Australia became his permanent home—where, in 1916, he was appointed as the foundation professor of harmony and composition at the newly established NSW State Conservatorium of Music.[31] Hill held this post till his retirement in 1934, following which he established his own short-lived music academy in Sydney; thereafter he remained active in Australia as a composer, conductor, teacher and lobbyist in the promotion of music in both Australia and New Zealand.

Hill's life and work have been extensively documented by John Mansfield Thomson and Andrew McCredie.[32] McCredie has identified three clear stages in Hill's compositional output. The first, from the 1890s until the early 1920s, was largely devoted to dramatic works—operas and dramatic cantatas. The remainder of his career was centred chiefly on chamber music and concertos (late 1920s and 1930s) and then the composition of symphonies (from the 1940s). Hill's composition of operas, then, coincides with the last colonial years in both Australia and New Zealand and especially during the period covered by this chapter.

Hill's music was firmly based in the late Romantic Germanic style with some modest excursions into early twentieth-century "English pastoralism". The earlier works of his "opera period" comprised both the fashionable genres popular during the colonial periods in both Australia and New Zealand—namely comic operas or romances set as numbers with spoken dialogue—and also the dramatic cantata, similar to those mentioned earlier by colonial Australian composers. Hill's earliest work in this mould was *Hinemoa* (1896), based on a Maori legend, and a late successor—*Tawhaki*—was to follow in 1931.[33] This cantata format, as will be seen, also influenced Hill's only "Australian" opera, *Auster*, to be discussed in the final section of this chapter. Of the remainder of Hill's later operas, two—*The Rajah of Shivapore* (1914) and *The Ship of Heaven* (1923)—continued his earlier preferred format of number opera with spoken dialogue, while two others—the Maori-themed *Teora* (1913) and *Giovanni the Sculptor* (1914), the latter a short three-act opera written for the "double bill" with Hart's one-act *Pierrette* for the inaugural season of the Australian Opera League—were all-sung operas, though with set numbers. They also made some use of leitmotifs, influenced, McCredie suggests, by performances of German operas by visiting repertory companies at this time.[34]

Hill's most obvious connection with artistic nationalism during his early career was exhibited in a preference for Maori subjects as witnessed among the operas and cantatas already mentioned, as well as in titles and programmes for a number of instrumental pieces. Nevertheless, his identification with Australia was strongly manifested, soon after taking up

permanent residence in Sydney, in his promotion of the Australian Opera League. Thomson records Hill's comment on its foundation as follows:

> Now we want to write our own operas and produce them in our own country with our own people. We are a musical people; it is in our blood.[35]

As mentioned before, Hill's only Australian-themed opera was *Auster*. His most significant "Australian" music was written many years in the future, after the Second World War in connection with his film scores and his "Australia" Symphony (1953), making use of Aboriginal chants and—in the case of the Symphony—an Australian programme. For the rest, Hill maintained a fierce lifelong love for, and identification with, the music of both Australia and New Zealand.

Other Composers

The growing preference for through-composed operas on serious subjects is amply demonstrated in the work of a number of other composers during the 1910s and 1920s, as shown in particular in Wood's catalogue. Few such operas, however, achieved full professional productions, indicating the ongoing preference, on the part of the public and producers, for Australian operas to conform to conservative "neo-colonial" trends. Nevertheless, in addition to the composers already discussed, the attraction to through-composed opera is also seen in the work of others—perhaps the most notable, in terms of the number of operatic projects undertaken during these years, being the Adelaide composer, Hooper Brewster-Jones (1887–1949). Brewster-Jones later showed strong nationalist interests, as witnessed in his *Australian Bird Call Impressions* (1920s) for piano and the orchestral tone poem *Australia Felix* (1940). Conversely, in the period covered by this chapter, he essayed no less than seven operatic projects, all following the fashionable trend to avoid Australian subjects. Brewster-Jones was attracted to the composition of operas for only a decade or so, from about 1915 to 1927, after which he abandoned the medium. This may or may not have been a result of discouragement regarding the lack of public outlets for Australian operas. Of his seven operatic essays, none received performance and five remained incomplete. Only one score—that of *Deirdre of the Sorrows* (1915) which antedates Hart's setting of Synge's play by a year—survives more or less complete, while the remainder are lost or survive in sketches only. On surviving evidence, four were through-composed, including two "opera-ballets".

Other composers of all-sung operas during the period include three immigrants, of whom two were women. The first was Mona McBurney