

U3A

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Series 3 2007

HOW (NOT) TO COMPOSE AN OPERA

Dates: Friday, 14 September–Friday, 19 October 2007

Time: 10 am – 12 noon

Venue: Frank Nichol Room, Knox College, Arden Street, Opoho

Enrolments for this course will be limited to 50

Course Fee: \$30.00

Tea and Coffee provided

Course Organiser: John Burton (477 7371)

Course Assistant: Sue Harvey (471 0546)

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You may apply to enrol in more than one course in each series (subject to numbers). If you wish to do so, you must indicate your choice preference on the application form, and include payment of the appropriate fee(s).

All applications must be received by noon on Wednesday, 8 August 2007, and you may expect to receive a response to your application on or about 17 August.

Any questions about courses after 17 August should be made to the Secretary, U3A Dunedin, telephone 471 9913 or on email at <graysinn@clear.net.nz>

HOW (NOT) TO COMPOSE AN OPERA

How is it possible to tell a story in music? What is “dramatic music”? What rules operate in a world in which everyone sings all the time? Which is more important, music or words? Where should the priorities lie, with the singers or with the orchestra? For 400 years opera composers in the Western world have been wrestling with these questions, and they have come up with a wide range of solutions. The composer writing opera in the 21st century therefore has a bewildering array of possible models to choose from. John Drummond explores ways in which opera has been composed from a historical perspective, and concludes with thoughts about the techniques he has used in composing the music for his opera “Larnach”, premiered in May this year.

John Drummond, who will present all sessions, is Blair Professor of Music at the University of Otago. He has been involved in opera since his teens, conducting and directing it, writing and broadcasting about it, and composing it.

The Lecture Programme

14 September **“Inducing in another the passion that one feels oneself”**

The Florentine musicians who invented opera around 1600 established ground rules drawn from their research into Greek tragedy. But communicating the passions felt by an individual meant creating a new kind of musical expression - recitative

21 September **“Airs that charm and elevate, {and} acquire the applause of the audience”**

By the end of the seventeenth century opera had become spectacular entertainment, and the *opera seria* that followed focused on solo arias for star singers. What was dramatic about that? Nothing, said some commentators, and the artificiality of *opera seria* aroused criticism, much of it satirical and funny.

28 September **“Music’s true office: serving poetry by means of expression”**

In the 1760s a group including the composer Gluck sought to create a new kind of opera driven by the need for ‘beautiful simplicity’. At the same time, composers of comic opera devised a way to present in music an evolving dramatic situation involving several characters simultaneously: the ensemble, whose greatest exponent was Mozart.

5 October **“The stimulation of nerves and senses”**

During the nineteenth century Italian composers focused on telling stories of high emotion through the power of the human voice. Bellini, Donizetti, Verdi and Puccini provided a mix of thrilling dramatic situations and thrilling music – just what the public wanted. Wagner would call it ‘entertainment for tired businessmen’.

12 October **“A fully-rounded and self-contained work of art”**

Wagner’s solution to composing opera was to create a complete musical universe, continuous, symphonic and orchestral, linked to the story through musical motives. He called it The Music of the Future, and almost took over the operatic world.

19 October **“Okay, so now what?”**

Where does all this leave the opera composer today? The twentieth century saw some interesting experiments, including serial opera, non-opera opera, sung-play, and minimalist opera. But opera audiences continue to look to the traditional works. John Drummond explains how he approached the task of telling the story of William Larnach in his recent opera, using many of the musical techniques outlined in this course.