

COMPOSER INTERVIEW

‘Where Words Cannot Reach’: An Interview with Gordon Kerry

James Wade

Born in 1961, Gordon Kerry lives in north-eastern Victoria. He studied composition with Barry Conyngham at the University of Melbourne, and has held fellowships from the Australia Council, Peggy Glanville-Hicks Trust and the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, USA. In 2009 he was awarded the Ian Potter Established Composer Fellowship to compose new works for the Sydney Chamber Choir, Bendigo and Sydney Symphony Orchestras, for the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, and to complete a new opera with playwright Louis Nowra. His book, *New Classical Music: Composing Australia* (UNSW Press) was published in 2009.

JW: You have established yourself as one of Australia’s pre-eminent composers and music commentators despite living in relative isolation in rural Victoria. How did you find yourself in this position?

GK: It’s sweet of you to describe me as preeminent, though (and this isn’t standard-issue false modesty) it’s possibly a bit grand. But I have had the great good fortune to pursue composition as a freelance profession now for many years, and I realise that’s an enviable position. I should say, though, that I moved to the country in 2002, so already had a good decade or more as an established composer. I’d had numerous commissions, residencies (Musica Viva in Schools, Sydney Philharmonia), fellowships (Australia Council, PGH trust, Virginia Center for the Creative Arts), and written orchestral, chamber and choral works and my first opera, *Medea*. As far as commentating goes, same deal: I had been a critic for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, written the odd feature for *24 Hours* (which became *Limelight* at some point), *The Australian*, the *Australian Financial Review* and chapters of books on, *inter alia*, Musica Viva, Barry Conyngham and the Australian Music Centre; that covers a couple of decades of Australian music history. I doubt if I could have survived if I’d decided to rusticate myself near the start of my career, or even when I did, had I not had access to the joys of the digital age.

JW: How has this change of scenery changed your approach to composing? I imagine the change could manifest itself in a number of ways, potentially leading you to ponder more on the natural environment or actually yearning for the city around which you are no longer surrounded.

GK: Yes, the effect has been complex, if subtle, as it applies to my musical language. By which I mean that many pieces I composed as an urban dweller were already in some way inspired by/illustrative of the natural world, and, often specifically, the sea (near which I lived whenever I possibly could), which provided a number of musical and literary models for certain pieces. So, of my orchestral work written pre-2002, *harvesting the solstice thunders* is a sea picture and *Bright Meniscus* is partly a landscape piece, but then other pieces are 'absolute'; the piano trio *No Orphean Lute* takes its title from a Robert Lowell poem that describes a burial at sea, but was 'about' a friend who died of AIDS. And so on.

A recent piece, the piano quintet *Aroona Dawning*, was commissioned to celebrate a patch of rainforest in Queensland, and specifically its birdsong; inevitably I've been alive to those kinds of sounds as they differ from urban ones. And I suppose in some pieces since there has been an interest in de-cluttering, though whether that's just part of moving into one's late period, or a reflection of the landscape, I'm not sure. Where the effect is measurable is in those works written for performance in this part of the world, the most important, to me, of which is a piece called *Through the Fire*. In 2003 we had bushfires nearly as horrendous as in 2009, and to commemorate them at Opera in the Alps at Beechworth the following year I wrote a piece that depicted the trepidation, violence, destruction and regeneration associated with those fires. I used a variety of texts, including quotations from news stories about what local people had been through, and finished with a big affirmation. It was for soprano, tenor, choir and orchestra, needed to be intelligible to three thousand people seated outdoors (with a little help from the PA) and reflect the experience of many people in that audience. So it demanded a musical language that was simple and direct and resonant. It was, of course, an occasional piece, but it inspired huge interest in the community beforehand, and a great response on the night. So paradoxically, I guess I connected with a community here in the regions in a way that wouldn't be possible in a city.

JW: I'm keen to know more about your involvement with music making with local groups outside of the major urban centres. Beyond what you've already mentioned, do you approach your writing differently for this audience? How does the climate for 'fine music' vary between the urban and rural communities?

GK: I've long thought that if new music is to survive it needs to be part of music-making at every possible level—a case of stating the bleeding obvious, but not always a view held in the contemporary music world. So I had done some work with community choirs and education programs. It's not merely a case of writing for the audience, of course, as much in this instance as for performers and their strengths.

I have done some work with ensembles associated with the Murray Conservatorium in Albury, which is part of a network of such music-schools in New South Wales. It has a chamber orchestra of teachers, students and interested amateurs, and is associated with a choir and children's chorus. I was commissioned on two occasions by Albury City to write works for ceremonial occasions using those forces: one to celebrate the anniversary of the rededication

of St Matthew's church, a Blacket-designed building destroyed by fire and rebuilt; one for the opening of the new Library-Museum. So the council, rightly, saw the need for specially commissioned music and there were large audiences for both. As occasional works, there needed, as with *Opera in the Alps*, a certain directness of utterance. Also, the players' instinctive fear of new music (not restricted to amateurs and students, I need not say ...) needed to be taken into account. In *Grow Higher, Ancient Doors*, the St Matthew's piece, for instance, I began with slow ostinatos that repeatedly sounded open strings; the players could orient themselves easily, and it sounded well in the church's acoustics, which gave them more confidence to tackle the more intricate, later parts of the work.

When the ABC commissioned me to make a new completion of the Mozart Requiem, and asked for the inclusion of children's chorus singing appropriate Australian texts, I wrote for the local Voices of the Murray and they got a national broadcast. I also worked with the Riverina Summer School for Strings at Wagga Wagga one year, which attracts students and amateur players from other parts of the country, and whose concerts, particularly the final festival show, attract a lot of local concertgoers. And when the AYO sent a young quartet to be resident at the Murray Con I wrote a piece for that quartet, which was played all over the region in halls and churches and my house. So the local people are interested, particularly in the work of another local; more broadly, there is interest in fine music: Victorian Opera's *Don Giovanni* a few years ago sold out to an engaged and alert audience. Sydney and Melbourne Symphony Orchestras both play hereabouts from time to time as does ACO2, and Melbourne Chamber Orchestra had a well-received show, including a work of Benjamin Martin's, last year.

JW: How do you approach the process of collaborating with the musicians and ensembles with whom you work? Do you tailor the music to those who premiere the work?

GK: In most cases I'm commissioned by or for a specific soloist or ensemble, so yes. Just as I think about the particular strengths of those amateur groups we've talked about, I take into account what it is like about the musical character/s for whom I'm writing. That can range from an ensemble that always plays new music as against one that includes new music in more canonical programs—I might in that instance reference the tradition more than I might otherwise; certain orchestras have certain sounds or individual players that one might want to exploit. At the same time, the music ought to be performable by other people (ideally) as well, and it's always fascinating to hear the second, third, fourth interpretations of a piece, which may differ from that given by the original performers, and can pleasantly surprise me. In the case of a work like *Midnight Son*, my most recent opera, it was a matter of finding singers who had the kind of voices and personalities for which I'd composed. So I do try hard to make sure that I'm working idiomatically for whatever voice/instrument.

JW: How do you approach the progression of your artistic development? Are you still improving as a composer and refining your style? Do you ever return to your older works to revise them?

GK: I hope I'm improving, and that one day I will produce a work with which I am completely and unambiguously happy, and which sounds like it was written with complete ease. I doubt that it will happen before I'm gathered, but you never know. That being said, I don't really

revise earlier pieces. This is partly as I have had the great good fortune to almost always be fulfilling a commission, so there isn't time to tinker beyond fixing obvious typos or misjudged dynamics or whatever might come up in rehearsal. It's also because I'd like to think that I recognise more serious errors and don't make them a second time, and, finally, I suppose, because whatever legacy I leave will almost certainly be on the basis of some individual works rather than the whole train-smash. And I'm pleased to say that there are individual works from throughout my career of which I remain fond, even if they represent stylistic or aesthetic positions that I no longer occupy. But I'm also aware of instances where composers change, as we all do inevitably over time and for a host of reasons, and are criticised (or ignored) for departing from a manner that attracted attention in the first place. At least I haven't been cursed by too much early success.

JW: As you have a parallel career as a writer of music and on music, do you critique your own music as you would any other? Is it problematic to play both roles in the creation and the dissemination of the understanding of music?

GK: Most of my writing on music, in recent times, has been about providing cultural context and suggesting productive ways of listening—and that holds for things like my book as much as for more modest things like program notes. I'd hope that that means that my descriptions of my own music are illuminating. I suppose, too, that it's not surprising that being a word-person, I sometimes make verbal notes while sketching the broad outline of a piece to remind myself of colour, instrumentation or mood or whatever at a particular point, that I will flesh out later on. I haven't written criticism, that is, newspaper reviews, for some time, though I sometime amuse myself by imagining what an unsympathetic critic might say of my work (which is not a bad exercise). And I do hear, and suffer greater embarrassment for, the faults in my work more than in other people's. But there is, I think, a point at which composing music becomes 'ineffable.' Copland famously said that where a literary person 'puts together two words about music, one of them will be wrong'; being a musical person who can string a sentence together might offer an advantage, but there is something at the heart of composing and listening that words can't always reach.