COMPOSER INTERVIEW

Whipping Up a Storm—Composing *Batavia*: An Interview with Richard Mills

Anna Goldsworthy

I first met Richard Mills nine years ago, when he and my father, Peter Goldsworthy, began working together on their first opera, *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*. I was a little in awe of him. During his visits, he would commandeer the piano and demonstrate a one-man version of the *Doll*. He mauled the instrument like a bear, seizing great clumps of orchestral chords, and singing in an impassioned falsetto. I missed out on any similar preview of *Batavia*, their second collaboration, as I lived away from home for its five-year gestation. Opera Australia sent me the vocal score earlier this year, and I interviewed Richard during March 2001, by telephone. He had secluded himself in Queensland to orchestrate the work. I next spoke to him on 10 May 2001, the evening before the opera's premiere in Melbourne. 'I feel like a condemned man,' he moaned. *Batavia*'s premiere met with much acclaim; John Slavin in the Melbourne *Age* described it as 'the most ambitious and significant opera attempted in Australia since Meale's *Voss*.'

The opera tells the story of the wreck of the *Batavia* in 1628 off the western coast of Australia. In a scenario that inspired William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, a group of survivors established a reign of terror. By the time the ship's commander returned with a rescue party, more than one hundred people had been murdered. The ringleaders were tried and hanged on the spot. Two of their accomplices were marooned on the Australian coast.

Richard, the story of the *Batavia* has always seemed peripheral to our history in Australia. Have we tried to forget it because of its darkness?
Yes, I think that's partly it. Also, it's not an English-speaking history, and it preceded what we normally see as white settlement.

It's a story that unfolds along such mythic lines that it would seem to have been ripe for operatic treatment. What drew you to it in the first place?
It was Peter Goldsworthy's idea, actually. I was never particularly keen on it. It was one of ten subjects that we submitted to Opera Australia, and it was the one that they chose. Even then I

had grave reservations. I tried to get them to change it, both because of the expense and the sheer practicalities of doing it. I could see it would cost them a great deal of money. It's an epic story, and you can't tell an epic story except through an epic process on the stage. You can't have it relayed through the eyes of two people. There's a shipwreck, and an orgy, and executions, and it's about the conflict between groups of people. That sense of amplitude is a very important part of the dramatic structure. The materials of the story are such that they cannot be compressed.

So it was never going to be a chamber opera?
It couldn't be. The whole notion of the ship as a kind of floating city...

Or even as a symbol of civilisation?
Exactly. It's not a small subject. It's an epic story, and it contains the processes of epic, right down to some of the minutiae of the plot. For example, the idea of the journey into remote regions is paralleled by a similar journey into far-flung realms of human behaviour. As the boat leaves Europe it also leaves the old world, and travels into the domain of myth. Then there's the naming of people that takes place in Act 1 Scene 1: the ritual naming of the participants in the epic. We don't actually go into genealogies, but there are vestiges of the epic poetic process in it.

To what extent was the story consciously converted to myth?
Oh, it was very conscious. There were a lot of deliberate glosses over historical facts.

Robert Donington suggests that the process of creating an opera is both conscious and unconscious.[1] Richard Strauss describes the risk of the 'breath of academic chill' if an opera is too cerebral in composition. What was the process for you of uncovering the symbols of this opera, and creating a work that resonates on so many levels?
To some extent, it was a felicity of invention: the story itself contains these elements. The story itself has a symbolic potency, and contains Jungian imagery: the boat is a Jungian image, the journey is a Jungian image, abandonment in the desert is a Jungian image. These elements are within the story, and there's nothing you can do about them as composer except exploit them.

After you had teased out these symbols, what came next in the compositional process?
I think the decision about the language helped. We decided to go for Miltonic or metaphysical poets' lexicography. It creates the sense of the speech of another time—not necessarily in a literal sense, but in the sense that the characters do not speak like contemporary people. This introduces dimensions of meaning. This sense of another time is very important for the meaning of the story.

So how would you feel about a revisionist contemporary staging of this opera? Do you as the composer feel proprietorial about the staging of the opera?
Yes, I do. You mention Donington. One of the great truisms of Donington is that a lot of bad opera direction seeks to interpret the symbols rather than stage them. The symbols have their

[1] Robert Donington, *Opera and its Symbols: The Unity of Words, Music and Staging* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1990).

own potency. I believe that respect for the text is very important; words have meanings, and they are quite specific. As for a 'revisionist' staging: it would depend on how it was done. I would be quite annoyed, for example, if the opera were set on the moon. I'm not saying that it would be impossible—never say never!—but I would be gravely suspicious. Perhaps the opera could be set on the moon, as long as there was this sense of a remoteness of place.

Why is this sense of remoteness of place necessary?
It heightens the microcosm of civilisation we see before us. There are no mitigating filters; the imperative is engendered by isolation. This is a common truth of all island literature. The symbol of the ship is very important, as is the symbol of water and land, and the notion of the journey.

Presumably if the symbols are strong enough, then—despite what Donington might say—an opera should be able to withstand any number of stagings.
Yes, but withstanding is not the same as complementing. I have less patience for this, now. The number of updatings or relocations that are revelatory as opposed to anecdotal is very small. These productions transpose peripheral issues. Often some fairly tortured constructs have to be made to make the production work in relation to the original, and they serve the meaning of the work very poorly. This *Il trovatore* that we're all doing, for instance; I can't see the point of transposing it to the Spanish civil war. *Trovatore* works quite well in a legendary Andalusian place, but when gypsies become soldiers it becomes problematic. Much of the directorial laissez-faire that occurred in Germany after the war was the result of a profound need for a culture of forgetting, in a country that had perpetuated the Holocaust. There was still a hunger for the standard operatic repertoire, but there was also this conscious process of reprocessing this heritage—or reprocessing the lacunae of that heritage—in such a way that it bore no relationship to the past. That's why you had Darmstadt and Stockhausen. They were part of a process of destroying, through deconstruction, past edifices of cultural glory. It becomes so ludicrous and grotesque in so many instances. I call it the 'anything but' school of opera production. *Rigoletto* will be anything but a hunchback, *Tosca* will be set anywhere but in Rome.

It can be patronising to audiences as well. There's the assumption that unless the work is made more 'relevant' it will not be meaningful to them.
But what is relevant? To whom or to what? Transposition of super-structure has no relation to the organic meaning. I'm not saying that it's impossible to do a contemporary version of *Tosca*. It very well may be, because it's about intolerance and fascism, but *Tosca* is so rooted even in those locales, in Sant' Andrea Della Valle, and Palazzo Farnese and the roof of the Castel Sant' Angelo. It's all so Roman. I've never seen a production that changed things like that which was revelatory. I don't think audiences ever really liked *Figaro* set in an apartment block. You find more and more opera budgets being spent on unnecessary new productions. It's jobs for the boys.

In Pelsaert's opening soliloquy, he presents himself as something of a Ulysses, and reflects on the motivation for his travels, 'the cruellest of needs, The Lust to know and find.' This contrasts with the colonial and material motives of others embarking on this journey.

There's a great book by R.H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1938). The reason the Swiss invented Calvinism was that they were obsessed with money, and wanted to get to heaven as well. This is an excessively cynical view, but there's an element of truth to it. The Puritan experience of imputed righteousness implied that people were marked or pre-destined for salvation. If people were pre-destined for salvation, the Puritans believed, they would also be blessed with material prosperity in this life. Everyone wanted to appear to be saved, ergo they needed to be rich as well. The optimism of the first scene stems from this belief that 'God is right behind our colonial mission.'

You use the observances of religion for creating ritual, but religion is much more than just a compositional device. The journey becomes a theological exploration, and pits Christianity against pagan alternatives.
The possibility of religious belief in the face of the hand of fate and human suffering is very much part of the thematic material of the piece.

You say in your notes that no final moral position on the action is taken, so the opera is not intended to be a didactic work. The sensuality of the music in some ways services Jeronimus's hedonistic philosophy...
The problem of representing evil in music is that if it's not interesting, multi-dimensional, and capable of admittance of the possible, then it will lack interest. It has to have fascination. It has to be seductive. Otherwise it's simply pedestrian. This was one of the challenges of the opera, to encompass this universe (if we can use such an inflated term) of feeling and experience. It ranges from the pious certitudes of religion linked to capitalism of dockside Amsterdam, to the preacher's devastating dark night of the soul in the second and third acts when all of his certainties have been stripped away, to Lucretia's gesture of heroic forgiveness. One possibility is counterweighted by another, as it is in life. There would be nothing more nauseating than some of sort of easy end that said 'there, there, everything will be all right,' after a tragedy of such mindless enormity. It is the same problem of reconciling events such as East Timor, Rwanda and Bosnia with the notion of Providence, in the sense of an optimistic purpose in the universe. It's a problem of the nature of evil, which is a theological problem.

There's a redemption of sorts, in that two of the mutineers are granted the possibility of a new life in Australia. The opera also concludes very beautifully with Wiebbe's lullaby to his children, which incorporates the rising fifth as part of its musical material, an interval which throughout the opera seems to have signified the stuff of hope, as in 'Land ho!,' 'Sail ho!' and even 'Go forth!'
The rising fifth also features in the Travel Sinfonias, and represents that idea of journeying forth, and optimism. The crux of the opera is contained in Lucretia's lines :

If God dwells within out hearts
Forgiveness is the proof
Its mercy joins both human and Divine
Raising us above the beast within,
Delivering us from never-ending sin.

These are, I think, rather beautiful words. All we have, finally, is each other. If people can believe in God, then fine. But the empirical situation is that we only have each other, and that our only salvation is in charity and love towards one another. This is the only way the world can progress, and it's an imperative, with or without the leavening of belief in the divine. If the opera has a moral position, it is that. There's also this sense of the newness of generation, of Zwaantie Hendricx and Conraat Van Huyssen marooned as Adam and Eve in the desert, from whence comes prophets, and renewal of the spirit. There is, as you say, the redemptive possibility of Australia as a new beginning.

And yet the opera contains an ambivalent view of Australia, even as a Paradise regained. What type of Adam and Eve are these two characters, and do we want them?
They're deeply flawed.

As of course any self-respecting Adam and Eve must be. The opera presents a Eurocentric view in that Australia occupies the 'dark side of the world.' It is when the ship crosses the equator that things go awry. Lucretia mentions letters sent from her husband in Java, describing a legendary Great South Land. He speaks

> **Of flying dogs, and crow-black Swans,**
> **Of rats the size of men which leap**
> **About on legs, and men themselves**
> **Burnt black as pitch, as if the pits**
> **Of Hell had spewed them forth.**

Australian artists—particularly those operating in such a European tradition as classical music—have sometimes entertained similar ambivalences about their identity. What does it mean to you to be an Australian composer?
There's a conceptual freedom to take what you wish from anywhere to make your own language. A freedom from cultural baggage.

You draw on a range of compositional techniques to create your own language in this opera. In the instrumentation alone you use a Baroque ensemble, a brass *Banda*, a symphony orchestra and recorded sounds. Can you describe how these various elements serve the dramatic action, for instance, the Baroque ensemble?
The Baroque ensemble is an emblem of innocence and simplicity, and always occurs with the children. It is also an emblem of another time, of Pelsaert's melancholy, and through that the eternal sadness, or 'vale of tears,' that suffuses all of our lives. Peter almost subconsciously quotes from Ecclesiastes at its last appearance, and this really defines it:

> What has been is what will be
> What has been done will again be done.
> Nothing is new beneath the sun.

In Act 2 Scene 9 when the children are drowned—a pivotal moment in the opera, and the event that provokes a theological crisis in the Predikant—the Baroque ensemble is suddenly dissonant. This is a dislocating acoustic phenomenon.

The instruments are using mean temperament. They sound very strange playing dissonances. They sound much stranger than the larger-bodied, less rigorous sound of the twentieth-century orchestra.

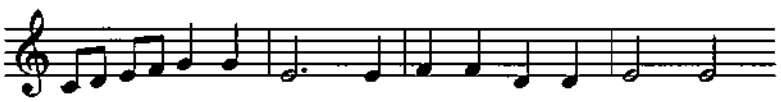
What does the *Banda* represent?

The *Banda* begins as the heraldic symbol of the Dutch East India Company, of the pageantry and the certitude and the arrogance of material prosperity, and the company's right to it. It represents the company's public as opposed to private morality. Then it crosses the bridges into the auditorium where it becomes part of the pantomime of the journey. That heraldic presence on stage is fractured, as the members of the *Banda* go to the four corners of the auditorium, where they become part of the flux and the force of nature. At the end of every act, they play more chordally together, and form part of the process of fate. Apart from the wash of the sea, they are the very last sound that is heard: they have a sound piece on the chord of F^6, in which they sing and play the trombone simultaneously, producing the interval of a fifth. You already worked out the meaning of the fifth.

What was the inspiration for the *Banda*'s fanfare language?

It's based on a resonance of Praetorius's dances in *Terpsichore*. This was very much the lingua franca of Europe. It was immensely popular and went all over the place. I don't use an actual *Intrada* of Praetorius, but I use a synthesisation of the little patterns that you find in the music of that time.

Ex. 1.



There is also a direct quotation of a *Bransle* from Praetorius in Act 1. This is in the epic scene in which the characters are being introduced. They sing their names over a counterpointing of the *Bransle* in the Baroque ensemble and orchestra. This is deconstructed through the process of the first scene, with the superimposition of two major triads. Sometimes three will be piled on top of each other, and resolved to a triad with a root that lies an augmented fourth away from the original. That C to F♯ polarity occurs in the very first bar of the opera, and is very important. It plays through right to the end, so that the Lydian mode, which is C major with an F♯, is in Wiebbe's lullaby. F becomes F♮, and there is this plagal ambiguity of tonic and dominant.

What other musics are employed?

I use the cadences of the Calvinist psalter, which inflects all of the preacher's and Maria's music, and the language of prayer and faith throughout the opera. It is taken from Utenhove. Religion as a strand of language has a consistency throughout the piece. All of the preacher's language is built up on triads with an appoggiatura to the third or the fifth. When he speaks in Act 2, there's a pattern of triads, and cutting against them are appoggiaturas, usually in the bass.

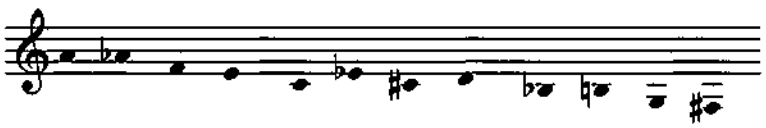
Why do you use this device of the appoggiaturas?

I use it as a manner of emphasis in the preacher's character. But also, rather simplistically, there's this sense in which the certitude expressed by the triads 'ain't gonna last.' The triads

are deconstructed gradually as he gets under more and more stress. The first time it occurs is when he says 'blaspheme no more,' after Jeronimus's aria in Scene 2.

You also draw on twelve-tone technique. Have you used this language much in the past?
No, this is a new language for me, and I'm using it in my symphony, because it's proved to be very fertile. In this opera, many of the characters have their own row. Pelsaert has a row. There's a row of good and evil, which splits into a series of interlocking, mutually exclusive hexachords. That's the process at the end of Acts 1 and 2. Often the harmony in both those scenes is twelve-tone. All of the scenes of evil in Act 2 are a passacaglia, based on that note row:

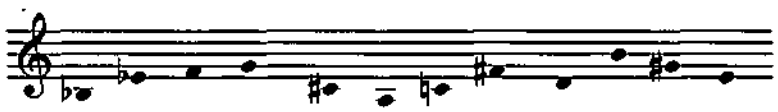
Ex. 2.



Pelsaert also has a system of modulating triads that go round and round in the circle of fifths.

Is that representative of his wandering nature?
Yes. They are also derived from a verticalisation of the row of good and evil. Jeronimus has a row, which is basically a chord of fourths in its Ur-form, followed by two implied dominant sevenths, A^7 and D^7, creating that dominant-tonic relationship.

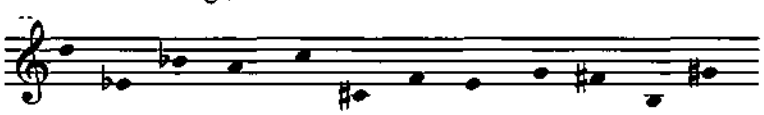
Ex. 3.



It is pregnant with chordal possibilities, and also has an element of the fantastic.

What lends it its element of the fantastic?
Oh, that's just a subjective construct of mine. But it coruscates, it's like a little diamond. It sparkles, with a lot of meanings, a lot of facets. Then there's Lucretia, who has a note row.

Ex. 4.



It's anguished, but then it reaches out, with a sixth at the end. It contains meaning in embryo; it's like a DNA of her character.

How rigorous is your use of twelve-tone technique?
It's not atonal in the rigorous linear sense. There are levels of organisation as there are in any great painting. Not everything is organised according to strict geometry. There are some bits that are free. The worse thing about atonal opera is that it can be unsingable, so this is very practically written for the voice. All of those note rows are in four groups of three, the permutation of which leads to hexachords. Then I use that old device of the opera, the circle of fifths. I suppose you could say it's Wagnerian and Bergian. In the Passacaglia, one group of six notes is followed by another, with no notes overlapping in any instance of the progression. The progressions are permutated through the circle of fifths, so sometimes on the cusp of a

permutation there will be notes in common. It's very fecund as a device. There's this subliminal sense of order in it, though I think it would take someone who knew a great deal about music to work out what was actually going on. Often, too, there is this juxtaposition of twelve-note inclusivity, harmonised by quite simple triadic progressions.

It's interesting how you dovetail these languages. Atonality to my mind implies tonality, if only through its stringent avoidance of it. This conflict is writ large in this work. The opera moves from the tonal certitudes of the *Banda*'s heraldic opening to the terra incognita, if you like, of greater and greater dissonance.
That process is a very important part of the harmonic narrative.

This 'harmonic narrative' provides a mirror to the history of tonality of the past few centuries. Is its tonal 'happy ending,' in which it returns to more diatonic terrain, wishful thinking on your part?
I make no such protestations! I am, though, a tonal composer at the heart of it.

You also draw on recorded sounds, and electronic sounds?
The recorded sounds are the forces of Dionysus, the screams, and so on. They have several functions. One is to be super-real; they move through the auditorium with a force that only amplification can give to a gesture.

These theatre of cruelty moments—the shipwreck, the execution scenes, the rape of Lucretia—promise to be oppressive in the extreme.
Oh yes. We've recorded the most blood-curdling screams. You can't get opera singers doing those kinds of things every night; you can only do them once. They're also an important part of the theatre of cruelty.

So is Artaud an influence in this work?
Yes, but I suppose the original theatre of cruelty was Sophocles. One of the things in Aristotle's poetics about tragedy is the power to purge by pity and terror. They were the ingredients of catharsis in the classical period of tragedy.

Finally, how has your experience as a conductor informed the process of creating this opera?
I think that the craft of opera is immensely complicated, and I don't think there's anything in music that comes near it in terms of its human complexity. All the composers who have done well with opera are the ones who have actually worked in the medium. It's so complex that you cannot know it from the outside. This applies right down to the simple process of orchestration, of knowing what will balance and what won't. It's also knowing what singers can do and what they can't do. There's only one way to learn that, and that's the received memory of conducting opera performances. Perhaps some people are so brilliant they can just learn it outside, but for me working in the opera industry as a conductor, and as artistic director of a company, has been inseparable from the craft of writing.