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From Overt to Covert: The Changing Role of Cultural Commentary in Australian Operatic Repertoire 1990–2009

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Introduction

Recently composed Australian opera offers music researchers insight into not only aspects of art music practice, but also into ways in which music creators engage with the broader issues of culture and society. The last decade of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first saw the discourse surrounding Australian culture contend with a variety of issues including postcolonial reassessments of Australian settler myths, reappraisals of the way Europeans have interacted with Indigenous Australians and contestations around how we should celebrate our culture leading up to and following the centenary of Federation. That these competing views of society should directly impact the operatic repertoire of the same period is an under-researched issue in Australian music.

In the years leading up to the centenary of Federation, many Australian operas sought to engage with the materials of the nation's history: from the events surrounding the death of Azaria Chamberlain to the building of the Sydney Opera House and to the shipwreck of the Batavia on an island off what is now Western Australia, major operatic productions overtly engaged in social commentary designed to challenge prevailing notions of Australian cultural identity. Since 2002, however, Australian opera has increasingly employed classical myth and European literature as the impetus for libretto and plot, eschewing an overt focus on Australian cultural material. This article examines the Australian operatic repertoire of the period and, through case studies focussing on various operas, explores the changing modes of social commentary embodied within the repertoire.

New Australian Opera: Eclectic and Ephemeral

Since 1990, nearly fifty new Australian operas have been registered with the Australian Music Centre, the nation's primary repository for newly composed art music (Australian Music Centre 2012). Furthermore, this figure does not encompass the full gamut of new opera in Australia: some composers eschew the national registry; others are not eligible to submit works to the registry, particularly those who abjure the label 'composer' including, for example, sound designers working in 'experimental' idioms[1]. Additionally,

in being set up around traditional notions of genre, the registry also struggles to deal with works that defy easy categorisation, such as some contemporary music theatre pieces that exist in a cultural space between the genre of opera and the genre of the musical. New Australian operas range in musical idiom from tonal to atonal, incorporate electro-acoustic technology to varying degrees, sometimes embrace and sometimes eschew various modes of contemporary popular music, and feature instrumentation that ranges from a conventional pit orchestra to eccentric combinations of instruments. In the vein of much recently composed art music, this repertoire is diverse and defies rigid stylistic classifications.

Like many of the Western world's equivalent cultural institutions, the primary business of Australia's various larger opera companies is the production of works from the (primarily) European classical operatic canon. Nevertheless, many Australian companies display a clear commitment to the production of new Australian opera. For example, since its inception in 2006, the Victorian Opera has consistently produced at least one new opera a year; Chamber Made Opera regularly produces new work ranging from chamber opera to experimental works to innovative 'Living Room' operas that seek to build new audiences for contemporary opera (Chamber Made Opera 2012), and other companies, including Opera Australia, Opera Queensland, the West Australian Opera Company and the State Opera of South Australia, have all commissioned and performed new works through this period. The appendix to this article lists the performances of new Australian opera by the larger national and state-based opera companies, from 1990 to 2012, with data drawn from the various companies' annual reports and websites, as well as other sources such as newspaper reviews and artists' websites. In light of this data, and considering the size of its population, it can be argued that Australia is in possession of a vibrant tradition of new opera.

Opera in Australia is primarily funded by a combination of grants from state and federal arts-funding bodies, philanthropic patronage and ticket sales (including income derived from tickets, programs and merchandise). In 2010, two of Australia's standing opera companies, Opera Australia and Victorian Opera, derived 35% and 65%, respectively, from various government arts grants (Opera Australia 2010b: 17; Victorian Opera 2010: 31). This grant funding, while often simply becoming part of a performing institution's general revenue, is sometimes tied to specific cultural outcomes, such as the fostering of young performers, making opera available outside the nation's capital cities – Opera Australia, for example, has, as part of its charter, a regular touring season that brings opera to regional audiences (Opera Australia 2010a) – and the production of new Australian opera. One result of government arts funding directed towards opera is that every major Australian city regularly hosts newly composed chamber operas, produced often by both standing grand opera companies and flexible ad hoc companies.

While many operas are created, workshopped and presented by semi-professional companies, only a few are produced at an elite level of performance. Additionally, the vast majority of new Australian operas only ever enjoy a single season. Rare exceptions include Alan John and Dennis Watkins'[2] 1995 opera about the building of the Sydney Opera House, *The Eighth Wonder,* which received a repeat season in 2000, and Richard Mills' operas, *Batavia* (first performed in 2001) and *The Love of the Nightingale* (first performed in 2007), which have both enjoyed seasons by multiple opera companies (see Appendix). Furthermore, these repeat seasons are, in every instance, restagings of the original productions: no Australian opera composed or produced in the period considered in this article has received an entirely new production. While recordings help build awareness of the Australian operatic repertoire and give selected works a life beyond live performance, Australian opera companies and composers are well aware that, in the main, they are producing work designed for a single use.

Singing Our Stories: The Changing Profile of Australian Opera's Interaction with Contemporary Social Discourse

The fact that new operas are likely to be produced only once perhaps encourages practitioners to actively engage in the contemporary discourse surrounding issues of Australian culture and identity: the notion of writing for posterity appears to be a less relevant motivating force. While these two motivating factors are not mutually exclusive, an analysis of Australian operatic repertoire since 1990 nevertheless reveals that a significant proportion of new opera has sought to depict aspects of Australian culture and history. Between 1990 and 2002, at least ten Australian operas, some produced by ad hoc and chamber opera groups, others by the major companies, were based either

on events drawn from Australian history or on works of literature that sought to portray Australian life and culture. While these operas, as cultural objects, have the capacity to transcend their local context and become emblematic of more universal issues, and indeed the creators of these operas have the capacity to embed broader issues within the mantle of a localised theme or setting, the overt use of Australian historical or cultural material as the impetus for a cluster of operas in the space of little more than a decade warrants examination.

These Australian-themed operas range from an intimate portrayal of a fictional Australian family's Christmas celebration in Colin Brumby and Thomas Shapcott's 1990 opera, *Summer Carol*, to an operatic re-telling of actual events in Moya Henderson and Judith Rodriguez' 1997 opera, *Lindy* (performed in 2002). *Lindy* depicts the trial, imprisonment and subsequent exoneration of Lindy Chamberlain following the death of her nine-week-old baby during a camping trip near Uluru (Ayers Rock). Some of these operas embody an idealised Australian settler history, such as Betty Beath and David Cox' *Abigail and the Bushranger* (1974, revised 1992), while others, such as Richard Mills and Peter Goldsworthy's *Batavia*, present a postcolonial reading of Australian history. Still other operas have sought to depict actual events that occurred in countries close to Australia – events that have resonated greatly in the Australian psyche. These include Martin and Peter Wesley-Smith's *Quito* (1994) which, via a pseudo-documentary style of narrative, speaks of contemporary events in East Timor, and Colin Bright and Amanda Stewart's *Sinking of the Rainbow Warrior* (1994, first performed in 1997) which tells of the sinking of the Greenpeace ship in New Zealand by members of the French foreign intelligence services in 1985.

From 2002 to 2009, this trend altered, with few new operas referencing actual events in Australian history: Gordon Kerry's collaboration with the Indigenous rock group, Nokturnl, *Ingkata,* a bi-cultural opera examining the relationship between anthropologist Ted Strehlow, and the Aranda people (Strahle 2008) being a rare exception. For most of the first decade of the twenty-first century, Australian composers and librettists have instead shown an increased interest in basing opera on folk myths, non-Australian works of literature and plays from antiquity. For example, since 2000, two Australian composers have based operas on Shakespeare's *Tempest* and there have been two adaptations of works by Lewis Carroll. Myth from a range of cultures has also provided the inspiration for new Australian opera, notably Julian Yu's *Possessed* (first performed in 2003), which is based on a Chinese myth, and Richard Mills and Timberlake Wertenbaker's *The Love of the Nightingale*, which is based on the Greek legend recorded in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

It is only recently that this tendency to eschew overt interactions with the materials of Australian culture has begun to wane. Operas such as Andrew Shultz and Glenn Perry's *The Children's Bach* (first performed in 2008) after the novel by Helen Garner, and Brett Dean and Amanda Holden's *Bliss* (first performed in 2010), based on the major Australian literary work by Peter Carey, both feature fictionalised Australian settings, and Deborah Cheetham's *Pecan Summer* (first performed in 2010) and Gordon Kerry and Louis Nowra's *Midnight Son* (2012), seek to depict actual events in recent Australian history. While the creative gestation of an opera can take place over several years, and any conclusions drawn over a specific piece would need to take into account any lag between the commissioning or inception of that piece and its production, this article is concerned with how changing cultural and political climes (which also unfold over many years) have the capacity to influence the behaviour of not only individuals, but also communities of practitioners. This article posits that the change in behaviour on the part of composers, librettists and opera companies in the first decade of the twenty-first century is not coincidental, but is instead the result of a confluence of cultural and political factors that extend beyond the sphere of opera and speak to major changes in the ways Australians view themselves.

A Tradition of Iconoclasm: Australian Opera in Academic Literature

That Australian opera has sought to make a contribution to the social, cultural and political discourse that surrounds the issue of Australian national identity is a matter of record in the academic literature surrounding the repertoire. Michael Halliwell's article, *A comfortable society: the 1950s and opera in Australia,* examines how evocations of 1950s Australia in three operas represented 'a conscious attempt to construct a national identity through artistic endeavour' (Halliwell 2004: 12). Halliwell argues that these works seek to deconstruct the

notion of Australia as simply a comfortable, homogenous Anglo-Saxon settler society and present a more complex postcolonial view of Australian culture in this time. For example, he uses Richard Meale and David Malouf's 1986 opera *Voss* (after the 1950s novel by Patrick White, which tells the story of a nineteenth-century frontier explorer, loosely based on the real explorer, Ludwig Leichardt) as an example of a work that highlights the different attitudes of Indigenous people and Western colonists towards land ownership. Halliwell (2004: 13) suggests that the opera, as opposed to the novel, places a different emphasis on the dramatic function of various Indigenous characters with the specific aim of highlighting issues of Indigenous land rights. The significance of this opera in contributing to political discourse is made clear when one considers the fact that it prefigures the 1992 ruling of the Australian High Court that overturned the notion of *terra nullius* and acknowledged the idea that land ownership existed prior to European settlement.

Halliwell and another Australian author, composer and critic Gordon Kerry, in *New Classical Music: Composing Australia,* both identify Richard Mills and Peter Goldsworthy's 1996 opera, *The Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* (based on a play by Ray Lawler), as an attempt to translate the Australian urban experience to the opera house (Kerry 2009: 47). In debunking the notion of Australia being a society devoid of class distinction (much of the drama of the opera hinges on a love match doomed due to differing working class versus middle class aspirations), the opera can be seen as an iconoclastic work that seeks to depict an unglamorous, gritty view of Australian suburban life, rather than an idealised view of 1950s Australia as a comfortable, affluent and innocent society.

The third opera Halliwell identifies as overtly engaging in the discourse surrounding Australian national identity is *The Eighth Wonder.* Employing dual narrative strands, the opera tells of the troubled relationship between the Danish architect, John Utzon, responsible for the design of the Opera House (referred to in the opera as simply 'The Architect') and the New South Wales government, with the musical coming-of-age of an Australian soprano. Halliwell traces how the opera can be understood by charting the difficult relationship between culture and politics in Australia, in parallel with the burgeoning career of the soprano, using them as a metaphor for Australia's emerging cultural maturity (Halliwell 2004: 22–4). Another writer, Jo Litson (1995: 6), in *Theatre Crafts International* (an industry journal), has quoted the set designer of the 1995 production of the opera as saying, '… the Architect will stand out because he was always viewed as a foreigner; he was welcomed like a god and turned out like a criminal'. This suggests the creators of the opera also intended it to comment on social issues including Australia's ambivalent relationship towards foreign bearers of culture. A phenomenon known as the 'cultural cringe' operated (and some would argue still operates) in Australia for much of the twentieth century: this is the idea that 'legitimate' culture needed to come from overseas while the cultural efforts of Australians were derided, undervalued or ignored. The journey taken by the Architect through the course of the opera – initially being lauded but ultimately rejected – can be understood as a comment on Australia's attempts to exorcise the notion of a cultural cringe. This idea is perhaps best captured in an exchange between the Architect and a character named simply 'Politician', where Architect bemoans that 'Everything here is from somewhere else; this country has no soul of its own,' and Politician responds with the terse question, 'Who do you think you are, you foreign prick?' (John & Watkins 1995: 65).

The Influence of the Culture Wars on Australian Opera

In dealing with events that took place prior to the early 1970s, operas such as *The Eighth Wonder* and *The Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* were able to make social and political critiques without drawing the ire of those in the Australian community who would object to their postcolonial reading of Australian history. However, the same cannot be said of Moya Henderson and Judith Rodriguez' opera, *Lindy*, which was based on events that took place in the 1980s. The opera was commissioned in 1991 and the score completed in 1997, but the work was not performed until 2002. The five-year delay between completion and performance is telling and will be considered later in this article. The performance of this opera is significant in that it is the last opera of its kind. For the better part of a decade since, no major Australian opera company has sought to stage an opera that depicts Australian historical events. Considering the fact that, prior to 2002, Australia had developed a robust tradition of opera that openly contributed to contemporary social discourse through the use of Australian settings and actual events, it is legitimate to seek to understand why Australia's opera companies have, seemingly en masse, changed their behaviour in this regard.

Numerous Australian academics have identified a phenomenon known variously as the history or culture 'wars'. This is a phenomenon that has informed the discourse underpinning current research in history, politics and culture studies throughout the academic world. In

an Australian context, this phenomenon refers to the jostling of competing views of society. On the one hand, left-wing postcolonial views of Australian society and its history – such as those inspired by historian Manning Clark and fostered by political scientist Robert Manne – have tended to focus on deconstructing settler myths that have grown up around the interactions between European and Indigenous people in the nineteenth-century. These approaches to appraising Australia's history are marked by a valuing of Indigenous oral history and by the relating of forgotten events that depict a less flattering view of early European settlement, specifically incidents of genocide against various Indigenous peoples and, later, the systematic, government-sanctioned removal of Indigenous children from their families and communities. On the other hand, right-wing modernist views of Australian history – such as those of historian Keith Windschuttle – have sought to maintain a linear narrative around significant events related to political and military achievement. Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, the leftist views were in the ascendancy and were viewed benignly by various political figures, particularly Paul Keating (prime minister from 1991 to 1996) (George and Hutchison 2009: 49–50). As has been demonstrated, the operatic repertoire stemming from this period can be seen, at least in part, as reflecting these attitudes towards history, society and culture.

With the election of the conservative Howard Government at the federal level in 1996, there was a backlash against what the Australian historian Geoffrey Blainey described in 1993 as the 'black armband' view of history (Macintyre 2003: 81). Numerous historians and cultural commentators have described how the Howard Government went about actively pursuing a culture war, using the political power of incumbency with the ultimate aim of re-establishing the dominance of an Anglo-Saxon culture and ending what it saw as stifling 'political correctness'. This agenda was carried out through a range of actions. The appointment of historian Keith Windschuttle – a noted critic of postmodern approaches to the study of history and strident critic of left-wing historians – to the board of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation was widely viewed as an attempt to curb that institution's perceived left-wing bias. John Howard's concerted effort to rehabilitate the commemoration of the Gallipoli landing – with its contextualisation of Australia as a scion of Britain and empire (Abjorensen 2009: 148, 154–6) – was understood to function not only to preference a particular historical narrative, but also to supplant the commemoration of the Australian military's action on the Kokoda Track in World War II, an aspect of Australian history championed by Paul Keating as a cultural touchstone that promoted a construction of Australia as an independent, mature nation acting within its own region and apart from Britain.

The operation of government-funded cultural institutions has also been scrutinised as another outworking of this culture war. For example, political scientist Dr Greg McCarthy, in a paper from 2004, traced how political interference by the Howard Government, both direct and indirect, significantly altered the exhibits that were developed for the then-new National Museum of Australia. This occurred through such measures as media leaks that pilloried the curator's intention to give Indigenous oral history an equal status with the historical accounts of European settlers; the appointment of conservative board members, who were then in a position to apply pressure on the curator; and the imposition of budgetary constraints that limited the Museum's capacity to enact its plans (McCarthy 2004: 10–3).

Considering the reliance that organisations such as Opera Australia have on government funding, it is possible that the change in behaviour with regard to the creation of new Australian opera was the result of a changed political environment: an environment where postcolonial or iconoclastic versions of Australian history were not welcome. While it is impossible to gauge the extent to which an entire nation's operatic community could be cowed into changing their behaviour as a result of a change in government, when one considers the three- to four-year lead time (longer, in the case of *Lindy)* that exists between the commissioning and performance of an opera, it is apparent that this change began to occur within two years of the election of the Howard Government. Added to this, the limited number of opportunities provided for Australian opera by the elite standing opera companies means that opera composers are not now, and never have been, in a position to antagonise these organisations. In his memoir titled *Brush Off!,* Australian composer George Dreyfus writes of a forty-year battle with Opera Australia over his opera *The Gilt-Edged Kid.* The work was commissioned by the organisation in 1969 but the company refused to perform the work. Over the ensuing decades, Dreyfus campaigned (often publicly) against the company, believing that the promise of a performance was implied in the commission. In his memoir, Dreyfus claims that successive iterations of the organisation's management had adopted an attitude encapsulated by his statement that 'We are not going to let Dreyfus win: it sets an unhealthy precedent' (Dreyfus 2011: 40). Dreyfus' experience perhaps demonstrates the vulnerable position that composers and librettists find themselves in and suggests the need for these practitioners to be pragmatic in their choice of subject matter for their operas.

An Emerging Ethical Practice in New Australian Opera

Another possible explanation for the change in focus of Australia's recent operatic repertoire speaks not of political interference into cultural activity but can be seen, instead, as part of a broader positive re-assessment of cultural practice. The last opera to depict actual events in Australian history, *Lindy,* represented an extraordinary attempt to hold a mirror up to Australian society with regard to issues such as sexism, sectarianism, racism and the abuse of power. For example, the opera seeks to show how the evidence of Indigenous trackers, who stated from the outset that the indications were that a dingo had dragged Lindy Chamberlain's daughter away from her tent and killed her, was ignored in favour of a white 'expert' who claimed it was impossible for a dingo to attack a human or drag a baby any distance. The favouring of Western knowledge (which ultimately proved false) over Indigenous wisdom, in part, resulted in the eponymous Lindy's imprisonment for murder (Craik 2009: 273).

In the 1997 score of the opera, the creators employed a conventional Western-style narrative to depict the experience of the Indigenous characters: they were overtly shown presenting the testimony they gave (with said testimony set to music), and aspects of Indigenous spirituality were invoked using Indigenous language and melodic material designed to imitate various modes of Indigenous music (McKenry 2010: 120–1). However, the recording of the 2002 production reveals that numerous changes were made to the way the opera dealt with these Indigenous characters: rather than an overt depiction, the characters' testimony was quoted by a defence lawyer, and all of the Indigenous language and pseudo-Indigenous melodic material was removed. The changes were likely brought about as a result of an emerging cultural awareness on the part of the creative team behind the opera of the sensitivities and sensibilities of Australian Indigenous peoples. The initial decision to give the Indigenous trackers a role in the opera may have seemed like an empowering act. However, the prospect of having a non-Indigenous Australian take on the role of an Indigenous tracker would have been increasingly unpalatable to both the practitioners of opera and the Australian audience. Furthermore, Australian Indigenous cultures often refrain from making reference to individuals who have died: expecting Indigenous singers to take on the role would have been equally insulting. The practice of Western composers writing pseudo-Indigenous music has also become a taboo. Whereas once, such a practice was seen as a means to create a distinctly Australian idiom of art music, it is now seen as paternalistic, insensitive and emblematic of Western appropriation and exploitation of Indigenous culture.

The extended time from the completion of the score in 1997 to its performance in 2002 perhaps gave the creators of the opera the capacity to reflect on the ethical framework that informed their interaction with the materials of Australian culture. The process of developing the score of the opera into a full production was clearly tumultuous with the resignations of first the director and then the conductor. The conductor, who later returned to the project, said in a 2002 newspaper interview, that the process was marred by friction behind the scenes: in his words, 'argy-bargy and to-ing and fro-ing' (cited in Morgan 2002). This 'argy-bargy' can be understood as the opera company coming to terms with the notion that not only the content, but also the means of conveying that content, needs to be tempered by a cultural awareness that takes into account the range of sensitivities that exist in contemporary, multicultural Australian society. An opera that seeks to comment on past social abuse has little authority if it is guilty of a similar abuse.

Opera Australia's experience with *Lindy* can be argued to have resulted in Australian producers of opera pausing in their efforts to contribute to the Australian social discourse and reflect on the need for an ethical framework to inform their contributions. It can be posited that this, in combination with the changed political environment outlined earlier, accounts for the eschewing of overt references to Australian history. This is not to say that Australian opera has retreated entirely from interacting with controversial social issues. For example, two recent operas make covert, but nevertheless significant statements about contemporary issues. *The Love of the Nightingale* uses the story of Tereus and Philomele to comment on the victimisation of women. Variations on the phrase 'we have no words' infuse Wertenbaker's libretto and function as a metaphor for the power of violence: it not only harms, but silences the vulnerable. The opera generally employs a complex tonal structure characterised by a highly embellished triadic vocabulary. Throughout the length of the opera, unadorned triads are seldom used. However, prior to the mythic transformation of the characters into birds, the narrative of the drama is interrupted and, quite separate to the plot of the piece, questions such as 'why are women attacked in car parks?' are posed to the audience. These questions are accompanied by a rare use of unadorned major and minor triads. This device functions as a powerful

reminder to the audience that the violence embodied in the main narrative of the opera (including the rape of Philomele and, later, the cutting out of her tongue) ought not to be viewed as simply part of an opera whose function is to entertain, but rather as something that should be mourned and condemned.

In Victorian Opera's 2009 production of Andrew Ford and Sue Smith's *Rembrandt's Wife*, the life of the painter Rembrandt is told through the lens of the experiences of three of the women in his life. So often the life of a genius is depicted as one of the individual suffering resulting in artistic achievement. The creators of this opera reverse this paradigm by showing how Rembrandt achieved greatness not only through personal sacrifice, but, in the words of the librettist, primarily through 'devastating carnage wreaked on the lives of those who loved him' (Smith 2009). The opera ultimately calls on the audience not to condemn Rembrandt's behaviour, but to recognise the presence of such behaviour within themselves and society more broadly. While the attempts of these two operas at didactic interactions with their audience are more subtle than the overtly discursive contributions to contemporary Australian social discourse in works such as *Lindy* and *The Eighth Wonder*, their power lies perhaps in the capacity for them not to be written off as blunt moralising, but to have their message penetrate beyond the immediacy of hotly-contested contemporary issues.

One opera premiered after 2009, Deborah Cheetham's *Pecan Summer,* celebrates a previously little-known aspect of Indigenous history – namely the abandonment of the Cummeragunji Mission by its Indigenous residents in 1939 (Cheetham 2010) – which, as an act of cultural self-determination, can be understood as a watershed moment for the Indigenous communities involved. In being composed by an Indigenous person and with Indigenous roles in the opera being performed by Indigenous opera singers, the work can be seen as a result of the broad cultural reassessment that has taken place in the Australian art music community with regard to the handling of Indigenous issues. The challenges associated with the excision of the Indigenous elements in *Lindy*, discussed previously, bear fruit in *Pecan Summer,* as it is ultimately Indigenous people who, as custodians of their own stories, must take the lead in using an art form like opera to share these stories with the broader Australian community.

Conclusion: The Future of Social Commentary in Australian Opera

This article has raised questions about the motivations of Australian practitioners in choosing subject matter and settings for new opera and, while no definitive cause can ever be established to account for the change that can be identified from 2002 on, such questions must be asked to ensure the continued relevance of the repertoire. It may be that, in light of the political climate in Australia, broadly unmitigated in the years since the defeat of the Howard Government in 2007, this oblique approach to social issues taken by more recent operas may be needful. It may also be the case that with the emergence of an opera such as Gordon Kerry and Louis Nowra's *Midnight Son* (2012), a work which deals with the events, people and issues surrounding the 2005 murder of Maria Korp, that composers of Australian opera once again feel confident to deal overtly with issues of Australian culture and history.

The future of opera as a voice in the contemporary Australian cultural discourse will greatly depend on the capacity of the creators of new works to navigate the dual challenges of dealing with the realities of the political clime and developing an ethical framework to deal with the telling of our own stories. If this interregnum between the telling of distinctly Australian stories were evidence of collective self-censorship to protect government funding – or worse, overt political interference in the operation of Australian cultural institutions – then new Australian opera, as a mechanism for cultural discourse, would be revealed as inconstant and precarious. Such a conclusion is, in any case, belied by the active, but veiled cultural engagement identified in works like *Love of the Nightingale* and *Rembrandt's Wife.* This interregnum is perhaps understood better as evidence of artists collectively re-examining how Australian stories are told. In this case, such a pause will ideally result in stronger, more powerful social statements being made through opera. While the operas considered in this article are but a sample of a larger repertoire marked by diverse approaches to every aspect of the genre – music style and idiom; design and structure; narrative approach; plot archetype; setting and subject matter – all can nevertheless be seen as being united by either overt or covert interactions with contemporary Australian social discourse.

ENDNOTES

1. The term 'experimental' refers to an idiom created by practitioners who work primarily in an electro-acoustic medium. In academic and industry literature, they are referred to as 'sound designers' and 'sound artists'. Increasingly, the term 'composer' is used only for those artists who concern themselves with the production of a score.

2. Throughout this article, unless otherwise stated, the composer of the opera is listed first, followed by the librettist.

APPENDIX

Performances of New Australian Operas by Five Major Australian Opera Companies, 1990–July 2012

Table 1: Victorian Opera [2006–2012] and Victorian State Opera [pre–1996]

Year	Opera(s)	Composer/Librettist	Notes
2012	*Midnight Son*	Gordon Kerry/Louis Nowra	(Victorian Opera 2012)
2011	*How To Kill Your Husband (And Other Handy Household Hints)*	Alan John/Timothy Daly	Based on the novel by Australian author Kathy Lette (Zwartz 2010).
2010	(a) *The Parrot Factory* (b) *The Cockatoos*	(a) Stuart Greenbaum/Ross Baglin (b) Sarah de Jong/Sarah Carradine	Both (a) and (b) were commissioned for and performed by the Victorian Youth Opera (VYO) (Victorian Opera 2010).
2009	*Rembrandt's Wife*	Andrew Ford/Sue Smith	(Victorian Opera 2010)
2008	(a) *Through The Looking Glass* (b) *The Happy Prince*	(a) Alan John/Andrew Upton (b) Malcolm Williamson	(Victorian Opera 2008b) (b) Based on a story by Oscar Wilde, this opera was first produced in 1965 (Victorian Opera 2008b).
2007	*(a) The Love of the Nightingale* (b) *The Snow Queen*	(a) Richard Mills/Timberlake Wertenbater (b) Grahame Dudley/Nick Enright	(a) Part of a series of three premiere performances in different states (see also West Australian Opera Company and Opera Queensland). (b) Presented by Victorian Youth Opera (VYO); revival of the 1985 production for the *Come Out* festival (Victorian Opera 2008a).
2006	*Metamorphosis*	Brian Howard	Revival (as a concert opera) of the original 1983 production for the Victorian State Opera (Victorian Opera 2007).
1996	*The Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*	Richard Mills/Peter Goldsworthy	World premiere as Victorian State Opera. This was the predecessor to the current Victorian Opera. Formerly known as the Victorian Opera Company, the Victorian State Opera collapsed as a separate company in 1996 and was subsequently merged with the former Australian Opera and based in New South Wales (Gill 2003).

Table 2: Opera Australia (OA) [1996–2012] & Australian Opera [pre–1996]

Year	Opera(s)	Composer/Librettist	Notes
2011	*The Love of the Nightingale*	Richard Mills/Timberlake Wertenbater	Premiere Sydney performance (Opera Australia 2012).
2010	*Bliss*	Brett Dean/Amanda Holden	Premiere broadcast live on ABC2 television and to regional cinemas (Opera Australia 2011).
2006	*Batavia*	Richard Mills/Peter Goldsworthy	Sydney production following on from the 2004 Perth revival (Mills 2010).
2004	(a) *Batavia* (b) *Madeline Lee*	(a) Richard Mills/Peter Goldsworthy (b) John Haddock/Michael Campbell	(a) Revival in Perth only – joint production between OA, WAOC and Perth International Arts Festival (see also West Australian Opera Company) (Mills 2010). (b) Libretto jointly written by Haddock and Campbell (Opera Australia 2010c).
2002	(a) *Lindy* (b) *Love in the Age of Therapy*	(a) Moya Henderson/Judith Rodriguez (b) Paul Grabowsky/Joanna Murray-Smith	(a) Premiere performance; score completed in 1997 (Morgan 2002). (b) Performed by OzOpera (Slavin 2002).
2001	*Batavia*	Richard Mills/Peter Goldsworthy	World premiere (Mills 2010).
2000	*The Eighth Wonder*	Alan John/Dennis Watkins	Revival (Verghis 2004).
1999	*The Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*	Richard Mills/Peter Goldsworthy	Premiere Sydney performance; first OA production (Mills 2010).
1995	*Eighth Wonder*	Alan John/Dennis Watkins	Performed under the company's former name of Australian Opera (prior to merger with VSO) (Australian Music Centre 2013).
1993	*The Golem*	Larry Sitsky/Gwen Harwood	(Arts Centre Melbourne 2009)
1991	*Mer de Glace*	Richard Meale/David Malouf	Avant-garde opera based on *Frankenstein* and real-life events of Mary Shelley, Percy Shelley and Lord Byron (Arts Centre Melbourne 2009).

Table 3: West Australian Opera Company (WAOC)

Year	Opera(s)	Composer/Librettist	Notes
2007	*The Love of the Nightingale*	Richard Mills/Timberlake Wertenbater	Part of a series of three premiere performances in different states (see also Tables Victorian Opera and Opera Queensland) (Mills 2010).
2004	*Batavia*	Richard Mills/Peter Goldsworthy	Revival in Perth only – joint production between OA, WAOC and Perth International Arts Festival (see also Opera Australia) (Mills 2010).
2003 – 1992	No data available		
1991	*Bride of Fortune*	Gillian Whitehead/Anna Maria Dell'oso Pellinor	Performed as part of the 1991 Perth Festival (written in 1988) (Rusak 2010).

Table 4: Opera Queensland

Year	Opera(s)	Composer/Librettist	Notes
2009	*Dirty Apple*	Jonathan Henderson/Shaun Charles	Part of the 2009 Queensland Music Festival; composed by a Queensland Conservatorium student; performed by school and university students (Opera Queensland 2012).
2007	*The Love of the Nightingale*	Richard Mills/Timberlake Wertenbater	Part of a series of three premiere performances in different states (see also Victorian Opera and West Australian Opera Company) (Opera Queensland 2012).
2001	*Seeking True South*	Stephen Leek/Philip Dean	Commissioned to mark the Centenary of Federation; this opera examines the story of immigration in Australia (Opera Queensland 2012).
1992	*Love Burns*	Graeme Koehne/Louis Nowra	Performed under Opera Queensland's former name of Lyric Opera of Queensland (1982–1996) (Opera Queensland 2012).

Table 5: State Opera of South Australia (SOSA)

Year	Opera(s)	Composer/Librettist	Notes
2009	*Daughter of the Sea*	Richard Chew/Bernie Doherty	Youth Opera, performed at the 2009 *Come Out Festival*; SOSA was also involved in the premiere of Chew's choral-theatre work *The Shouting Fence* in the same year (State Opera of South Australia 2012).
2008	*Ingkata*	Gordon Kerry, David Bridie, & Nocturnl	Billed as a bi-cultural Australian opera exploring the relationship of an anthropologist with indigenous peoples (State Opera of South Australia 2012).
2004	*Undertow*	Elena Kats-Chernin/Andrea Rieniets & Julia Vanhakartano	World premier at Adelaide Festival (State Opera of South Australia 2012).

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ABSTRACT

Australian opera in the 1990s was characterised by an overt interest in telling and retelling the stories of Australia’s immediate past. From the building of the Sydney Opera House to the trial of Lindy Chamberlain, numerous operas from this period explicitly engaged in social discourse designed to challenge prevailing notions of Australian cultural identity. Conversely, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, Australian opera has increasingly employed classical myth and European literature as the impetus for libretto and plot, eschewing an overt focus on Australian cultural material. This article examines the Australian operatic repertoire of the period and, through case studies focussing on various operas, explores the changing modes of social commentary embodied within the repertoire. Through an examination of actual operas and the commentary surrounding Australian opera, this paper posits that, while the repertoire is marked by diverse approaches to music style and idiom, it is nevertheless united by either overt or covert interactions with contemporary Australian social discourse.

Keywords: Australian opera, art music, cultural identity, culture war

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