

Sappho: Alive and Well in Portugal

Richard Letts

Jennifer Condon is young Australian musician who for the past three years has held an important position at Hamburg State Opera. But she has another remarkable project that is all her own work. Jennifer is interviewed by Richard Letts.

RL: Tell us about where you are in Hamburg and how you got to be there.

I'm currently in a plywood box about a metre wide and a few metres deep. The prompt box. The prompt box is the best place to start a musical career that I could possibly imagine. As one of the two prompts, my season is 19 operas.

RL: They do 38 operas?!

We do.

RL: My God. What do you do in the second year?!

There are a few repeats, thank goodness. But my repertoire after three years is somewhere around the 40 piece mark.

RL: It's a terrific experience.

There's nothing like it. The reason I wanted to go into the prompt box rather than start a conducting career as a répétiteur [accompanist/coach at the piano] is the connection with the singers, particularly in performance. I still like to do a lot of coaching – as much as I can – to get the répétiteur aspect happening, but there's nothing quite like the performance.

RL: What prepared you to take this position?

Years and years and years of sitting in a rehearsal room watching singers.

RL: Where was that?

Opera Australia. I started sitting in rehearsals in '97 or even a little earlier. My high school wrote to the opera company saying: "We have this strange teenager. We don't know what to do with her because she's opera crazy and she's driving us around the bend. Can you help?" And Opera Australia wrote back and said: "Sure, send her along." They put me in the corner of a rehearsal room until I left the country. I took my scores along and had the most fantastic singers giving me tips: why one needs to hurry along here because I need to get to the end of this phrase without a breath; or, why one must leave room for a breath here. And I still have all those scores. So I started learning the repertoire in a professional rehearsal room with all those singers.

By the time I got paid to sit in a rehearsal room with all the singers, the only difference was that it paid the rent and I was allowed to say something.

As a prompt straight out of a conducting degree, I still don't officially know what a prompt is. I can say that in public because my boss [Simone Young] knows that. I sit down there and to the best of my abilities help the singers in every facet – so whether they need text or whether they need entries or... just energy.

The most rewarding thing about sitting in a prompt box and the thing I love most about it is that you can hear your energy. You catch the eyes of the singers from the box, you give what you have to give, and it translates into sound and flies out over your head into the theatre. There's nothing to compare with that.

RL: You don't even have to sing it!

No! – I love it. It's one of the reasons I wanted to conduct. I didn't realise it was possible to that extent from the prompt box.

RL: What do you do with the singers when you are not in the prompt box?

It depends what they need, what the production is...

RL: Well, generally, what do you do?

Generally, in rehearsals, yell out the first couple of syllables of text, if that; when people have jet lag, you yell out a bit more. If they've just come from singing the same show in four other cities, you yell a bit less. If people don't like to be yelled at, at all, then you sit tight and watch for a flicker in their eyes that says "I'm not sure what comes next". Or some like to lip-read, and they can do that very successfully without anyone noticing that they're lip-reading – including me. There are a couple of singers who say: "Thanks for that." and I say: "What do you mean – you didn't look at me all night!" and they say: "No, no, no, I was reading the second verse from your lips".

RL: So your lips are going throughout.

I sing as much with the singers as I can. I've had some fantastic training. A few singers demanded that I breathe with them at all times when training for the conductorship. I now do that. Sometimes with Wagnerian singers it takes a few rehearsals to get the breath control to get through their phrases. But if I'm not yelling out in advance I breathe with the singers from start to finish. It's being at one with them. I think that's going to stand me in good stead for work out of the box.

RL: So, that's your day job...

Yes! That's my hobby!

RL: Then you've got this other thing going...

"This other thing" is a fantastic way of expressing it. It's just taken off.

RL: So tell us about that.

It started in July 2001, with the Opera Australia Federation Concert, conducted by Simone Young. And I was involved in my 'wench' capacity at the opera company. (I was called 'wench' by a number of singers for a number of years. I seem to have grown out of that, and I'm not unhappy about it.)

I prepared a lot of the scores in the Opera Australia library and was at the rehearsals. And sung quite late on the program was the final monologue from Peggy Glanville-Hicks' opera *Sappho*, conducted by Simone and sung by Suzanne Johnston. And I didn't know what to say; I'm very rarely speechless. I'm just not like that. I remember distinctly in the rehearsal during the next number, Suzy came and sat in the row in front of me and I slid along the row and tapped her on the shoulder and said "That was magic", because I didn't have any other words for it and still don't. It was the most extraordinary eight or nine minutes.

So I called the estate of Peggy Glanville-Hicks and I said I've just heard this thing, can I *please* have the rights? – I've done my research and I've seen that it was written in '63 for Callas and has never been performed and no-one's taken it up yet and the manuscripts are there and no-one has done anything with them, can I please take these scores and do something with them?

RL: This is the score for the entire opera...

The score for ... The scores are complete... she wrote her own piano score and orchestrated it herself so there is no material missing at all. It's just barely legible, partly having to do with Peggy at the time having a brain tumour and very poor eyesight. Her scores were mostly impeccable but this is one that is really difficult to read. So there's a complete score there but not in a form that anyone could use for performance.

Please, can I have the rights to this opera. And the lawyer for the estate, Shane Simpson, said to me: “Well that’s lovely, but please finish school first”.

RL: (Laughs.)

(Also laughing) I thought that was a fair enough request. So I finished school and called him back the next year, while doing an undergraduate piano degree. Again, “Come back when you’re a little bit older”. So I did that for nine years. And rang back, essentially as soon as I had signed my contract in Hamburg.

Actually, there’s a funny story to that. I had signed my contract and come home to Australia to pack up everything to move to Hamburg. And my mother was moving house and I was helping her move and deciding what was coming to Hamburg with me and what was being put in boxes in her garage. And having had no success with permission for the score for eight years, I had the massive manuscripts in my hand and I thought: “I won’t take them back to Hamburg with me because I’ve got this new job in a big opera house and I need to concentrate on that... and I’ll do it later.” And so the evening before I was meant to go I packed up my study and put the scores in a box and put it in the garage.

I woke up the next morning, made myself a cup of coffee, opened the kitchen blind out onto the mountain and trees in the background and on the tree directly outside the kitchen window there were two owls sitting there looking at me. I’ve never seen an owl before or after, live – I mean yes in zoos and things, but not just in the wild. And I’ve never had any kind of affinity with owls before.

Peggy, I knew, had a thing for owls. I didn’t know, actually until later, she was buried with one. But I knew that owls were her thing and a number of musicians who had worked with her before had thought they had been visited by owls. I just opened the curtain and looked at this thing and thought “Oh for God’s sake Peggy, *alright!*” And I went downstairs, unpacked the score, called the estate and that’s when they said to me ‘OK. We’ll consider it this time’

Wow.

They considered it for quite some time. I made my case to both Shane Simpson and James Murdoch (living in Bali) and they said eventually: “Look, we’re going to give it to you for four reasons: you’re Australian, and that’s necessary; you’re a woman, and Peggy would have liked that” (although she didn’t approve of the female or not description for musicians); you’re young (and I think they wanted the next generation to start taking things on). And Shane said to me after that, “And you’re a downright pain in the arse”. And I thought: That’s the quickest anyone has called me that!...

RL: High praise...

... certainly, just after I’ve met them. And he said, “You’ve kept on us for nine years, you’re an absolute nuisance. And Peggy would have done exactly the same thing. You remind us of Peggy, mostly in an irritating fashion. And we’d like you to go away but also we think she would have approved of you because you are so much like her in personality.” I thought: I forgive you for calling me a pain in the arse in our first meeting because being compared to Peggy Glanville-Hicks was an honour I was quite happy to accept.

And that’s how the rights came about. When I originally asked for them, I said it was just to do up the scores – “I’d like to get the scores ready for performance, create a performance edition, then turn that into a PhD at the University of New England.”

Of course, that wasn’t at all what I had in mind. I just thought it was polite to ask in small steps. Very shortly after that I asked could I have permission to do the world premiere recording and conduct it and just take that up and running. That then snowballed and that’s where I find myself now, preparing for that recording in July of Peggy’s centenary year, thanking my lucky stars she was born on the 29th of December because that means I can have the release ready *for* her hundredth birthday in 2012.

I originally wanted to look at an Australian cast and recording, it being the appropriate thing to do and also something I thought I would be able to pull off. But it just didn't work out. A number of things fell through – and as these things were falling through, I was working on my first production of *Elektra*, my favourite opera and with my favourite singer, who is also my favourite Elektra, Deborah Polaski, dramatic soprano. She saw that I was disheartened by my plans falling apart and she said 'Look, I'll do what I can to help'. And followed that with "I will look at the role and if I think it's something for me, then I will sing for a recording." A recording only, because a production would take up too much of her time.

I immediately launched into action and said 'Well if that's the case, we can ask this conductor and I'll assist them' and she said, 'No, I'm only going to do it if you'll conduct it because this is how we'll launch your conducting career'. This is sitting in a Starbucks in Hamburg. Time stood still. I don't know how long I sat there with my coffee cup in my hand. I have such enormous respect for her craft. That willingness to work with me as conductor, particularly on a recording, and a world premiere at that: that was for me... I really don't need any other confirmation than that. I have reached roughly what I wanted to achieve by this stage in my life as a musician. I know I have lots going on and a long way to go and I won't stop working and I want to become the best musician that I can but that was roughly what I was aiming for.

RL: Mm, it came early.

I know I haven't earned it yet, but I'm determined to. So nearly twelve months later, March 8 this year, standing in my living room in Hamburg she said, "OK, let's do it". Speechless. I then started talking to a number of singers I'd worked with in Hamburg – the best people I could think of for the roles.

RL: Saying that Deborah Polaski...

... saying that Deborah is my title role. Everybody said yes. It was worth asking Sir John Tomlinson, just for the look on his face. I don't think anyone lesser than Simone Young has asked him anything like that, particularly "Will you come in your summer holidays for three weeks, for no fee at all, and record this brand new opera with an absolute nobody conducting?" He's terribly polite and such a gentleman, but the look on his face was such sheer astonishment...

RL: (Laughs)

A week later he sent me an SMS saying: "You know what, I'm free theoretically at that time, let me look further at the score". And a week later an SMS came in my lunch break saying "Yes, I'm in! Wonderful. See you there". I just couldn't believe it.

The cast is not yet finalised and I'm not yet able to give all the names because I'm not sure they'll all make it. But the other really magnificent contribution to the effort is the German bass-baritone Wolfgang Koch, who is to sing his first Wotan at Bayreuth in 2013. I first encountered him as Alberich. I think actually I first drew his attention when I hid his cigarettes. I thought he was going to kill me. He was also Hamburg's Harry Joy for the premiere of Brett Dean's *Bliss*. We bonded then, teaching him to sing in Australian. Wolfgang is a fantastic singer and a fantastic person and he's the one I wanted to sing the second largest role, as Sappho's tutor...

It's the sound. I'm so excited about the sounds these people will make in a score that I have been looking at for a decade.

RL: So where's it going to happen and tell us about the orchestra...

That was a fantastic dinner with my favourite guest conductor in Hamburg, Lawrence Foster. I've worked with him a couple of times. An American conductor. We often chatted about bowing and conducting technique and we had dinner. And I said "Hey Larry, if Deborah signs on to this thing, can we maybe borrow one of your orchestras for it?" Again, who asks that kind of question?! I was expecting a no. And he said "Well, look, I think the Gulbenkian is about right for you. Let me talk to them. Let me know if she says yes and we'll check it out." I called him in a whirl of excitement

when Deborah said yes. “Hey Larry, she said yes. Can you do something?” He called orchestral management and I went to have a meeting – me, with four middle-aged suits, saying: “I’m nobody and this is my piece and I’d like to borrow you please.” And they are, to date, rather sceptical and my trial session with the orchestra in about two weeks time I’m hoping will sort out that little problem. But meeting with the orchestra and chorus, the Gulbenkian – I haven’t met an orchestra that’s that enthusiastic about anything. The wonderful principal clarinet took a vocal score home because she wanted to have a look at it and play it through on the piano and, I mean, that’s unheard of.

A lot of the players decided that since I was having to fund it on my own, and it was essentially a one-woman show, and I’d done the parts by hand etc. and said “Oh no, we’re going to make it work for you. It’s such a big project. Don’t worry, we’ll play well for you and management will ask you back every year...” You know. They have a battle plan. So whether that works out, I won’t know for another couple of weeks.

And my goodness, can they play! They are sensational. The acoustic in the hall is one of the best I’ve ever heard, particularly when it’s empty. So for the recording, it will be fantastic. And the chorus is an amateur chorus, which had me a little nervous until I heard them!

RL: So tell us about the work. What’s all this going to support?

It’s very difficult to describe. If I had to compare it to any opera, it would be Britten’s *Death in Venice*.

RL: It was her last work.

It was her last work. It was her fifth and final opera.

RL: And obviously, it’s never been done.

No. It was rejected by San Francisco Opera back in ’64 with the comment: “it’s too modal”. These days it’s reasonably harmless compared to all of the modern opera coming from all over the world. Peggy’s aim at the end of her career was trying to demote the principle of harmony. I guess in some ways, along with Strauss in *Elektra*, trying to get rid of tonality. He never quite got there. *Elektra*’s as far as he got in the direction of atonality. *Sappho* is as far as Peggy got in the demoting harmony principle. She didn’t quite succeed. That factor itself produces a couple of rather stunning moments.

RL: So how did she demote it? – by not having any?

By having far less than one would expect to find. The piano score is far more inadequate than any other piano score I’ve ever met, because what looks like double octaves on the piano is just a colour palette of different textures. A bass pedal tone in double basses or bassoons, melody from the voice, perhaps a counter-melody from a solo instrument but not necessarily, and everybody else will be in unison or octaves. One of my favourite bars is the first bar that I show people who scoff when they look at the piano score. It’s a bar that looks like simply two crotchets in a 2/4 bar. In the strings there’s quaver legato in one instrument, the next will have pizzicato crotchets, the harp will have sustained quavers, the oboes will have legato quavers – it’s the same two notes.

RL: It’s a sort of heterophony.

It... yes! And the colours it gives you, particularly with Greek themes, come from her study of Indian music as well. It’s a sound palette unlike anything I’ve ever come across. She’ll have this going for quite some time and then that concept of demoting harmony will fail her for a minute and there’ll be these *lush* harmonic changes before she goes back to the sparcity of her textural palette. There’s an awful lot of string tremolo – the violins are going to be seriously unimpressed when they see it. However it is actually orchestrated a bit too thickly and there will be a lot of stuff needing to be “tacetted”. The beautiful thing about having lines “tacetted” in this piece is that actually nothing will be changed... I can make things thinner or quieter without actually changing her intention.

The text is by Lawrence Durrell and the beautiful thing I just discovered is that he also was born in 1912 and died in 1990 as Peggy did. So it's also his centenary. He wrote a play and adapted it with Peggy to make a libretto so he was very heavily involved. There was a wonderful correspondence and also a photo shoot from her house in Greece with the two of them laughing over the score and playing it. His text is phenomenal and Peggy's setting is phenomenal but it requires people who can interpret every detail, every nuance of the text as well as singing it. The characters are so reliant on what is done with it. Which is why I compare it with *Death in Venice*. Simply, if you don't have an Aschenbach of the highest quality, singer and actor, the audience is asleep in about 15 minutes. The material is wonderful but it can't exist without someone wonderful to carry it.

The cast essentially should be older people. It's written for an older cast apart from a couple of small roles. So over 40s, if possible over 50s and people who have the full width and breadth of colours and life experience. That's totally vital to the success of the piece.

It's not Wagner or Strauss, but it has the potential to be hugely powerful. I think for performance it will probably need to be cut and I'll look into that. Having battled for years, the estate this morning gave me permission to take the piece and do what I will with it – ie. try to get it on for performance in Australia, overseas, cast it, conduct it. They said: "We're happy with what you are doing with it, keep going, take it as far as you possibly can and call if you need help."

So I'm now wildly excited about the opportunity to get it on stage on three continents, cast it and work it until I get a production up and running.

RL: So how are you going to do that?

I'm going to start calling directors of festivals in the next couple of weeks. When I first heard it, I spoke to the director Lindy Hume, when I was 16. I said: "Lindy, one day I'm going to get the rights to this piece and I'd like you to direct it." Lindy knew me well enough at that point so say: "Alright, Jen, call me back when you've got it."

I called her back this year and said "Hey Lindy, remember when I said..." and she said: "Yeah I remember." And I said, "Well, we're there". And so she has said she will consider the gig.

I'd like to have an Australian woman do it. There is some international interest so I'll look into that as well. There are connections all over the place, and with a recording headed by Polaski and Tomlinson, there will be plenty of interest.

Since then

This interview took place on July 13, 2011. Jennifer did her 'audition' with the Gulbenkian Orchestra and it agreed to make the recording.

Richard Letts is the Executive Director of the Music Council of Australia.