

# Nine-year quest fuelled by love for lost opera

December 3, 2011



Following her heart ... for nine years Jennifer Condon has tirelessly pursued the chance of staging the first recorded performance of Peggy Glanville-Hicks's *Sappho*. *Photo: Peter Rae*

**Affection for an aria has led one woman to pursue her dream of conducting a beautiful but elusive masterpiece, writes Steve Meacham.**

This is a most peculiar opera story. For a start, it is cheerful and life-affirming. And though it does involve the death of one of the two leading ladies, the plot is far from tragic or melodramatic. As for the ending, that's not yet written but this is one case where it is over before "the fat lady" gets up to sing.

It's a story which involves the late international diva Maria Callas, the rediscovery of a "lost" masterpiece by a female Australian composer, and a poet from ancient Greece whose very name is synonymous with lesbianism.

It all begins in 1989 when a six-year-old girl from Wollongong was taken by her mother to see her first opera, *The Gondoliers* starring Suzanne Johnston.

"I decided instantly that I wanted to be a mezzo soprano," Jennifer Condon, now 28, says. "Unfortunately, I'm not terribly good in the vocal department."

But the child's operatic determination continued and in 1995 she made the decision to become a conductor after seeing Simone Young wield the baton.

"I wrote a letter to Simone and essentially said: 'I'm 11 and I think you are wonderful. I want to be a conductor, too.'"

Young got in touch, telling Condon to come to the stage door next time she was in town. "So I did, and I ended up sitting in her rehearsal room at Opera Australia throughout my entire teenage years. I've learnt the entire repertoire with Simone through osmosis."

Flash forward 17 years and Condon is in Sydney for a week's holiday from her job in Germany. For the past three years, she has worked as *souffleuse* (the fancy word for prompt) at the world-renowned Hamburg State Opera under Young.

But it is no rest. Condon is home to publicise her nine-year crusade to conduct the first recorded performance of *Sappho*, written in 1963 by the Australian composer Peggy Glanville-Hicks and her lyricist, author Laurence Durrell. The full opera has never been heard. Until now.

Remarkably for an unknown conductor, Condon has assembled a world-class ensemble of singers and orchestra who have given their talents voluntarily to record *Sappho* in Lisbon next year in time for the centenary of Glanville-Hick's birth in December 2012.

Condon was 17 when she first heard a snippet of *Sappho*, the final aria - the only part of Glanville-Hicks's work that had ever been performed. It was part of Opera Australia's gala festival for the centenary of Australian federation in 2001.

Having helped part-time in Opera Australia's library, the Kambala schoolgirl already knew the sad story of *Sappho*.

"The initial commission from the San Francisco Opera in 1963 was ill-fated from the start," Condon explains. "They rejected it twice. It was largely to do with the fact that they only read the piano score because the orchestral score wasn't ready ... I would throw out the piano score as well. It doesn't look much at all.

"The other thing is that it was written as a vehicle for Maria Callas's comeback as a mezzo soprano in 1964. Which, of course, never happened."

When Glanville-Hicks - born in Melbourne - returned to live in Sydney in the late '70s, she sought to get the work performed.

"But Peggy had suffered a brain tumour while she was writing *Sappho* and her eyesight was particularly bad," Condon says. "Peggy was notoriously neat in her score writing, but this score is close to illegible. It's a scrawl."

Inspired by what she had heard at the gala concert, Condon wrote another letter - this time to the estate which has looked after the composer's works since her death in 1990.

"Peggy and her trust were always adamant that the first performance of *Sappho* should be on a grand scale. So they had been turning down requests for years," Condon says.

"I told them that I had seen these two extraordinary influences in my musical childhood, Simone and Suzanne, perform seven minutes from the piece, that I was absolutely spellbound and that I would like to conduct [the first full performance].

"And they said: 'Well, that's lovely, but we would like you to finish school first.'

"So I came back the next year and said: 'I'm a big girl now. I've done my HSC and I am an undergrad piano student [at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music]. Could I have the rights now, please?' We played this game for nine years."

Permission was finally granted in 2009. By then, Condon was in Hamburg, having followed Young's advice as a teenager to "study German if you are serious about being a conductor because then you'll get work". She was also completing her doctorate on the *Sappho* score, via correspondence with the University of New England in Armidale.

"Just getting the piano score onto computer took me 1000 hours," Condon says. "The orchestral score was 500 A3 pages of scribble. It is complete, but difficult to read. Getting it to orchestral parts was enormous. Nobody has the money to pay copyists to put it all together then hope someone will perform it.

"It really needed to be picked up by someone who wasn't established, had the time and was prepared to stay up for lots of nights studying it."

But publishing an orchestral score is one thing: assembling musicians worthy of it is another. American dramatic soprano Deborah Polaski ("the voice I love most in the world", Condon says) was first to be charmed. Then British bass-baritone Sir John Tomlinson. And over dinner Condon pitched her idea to Lawrence Foster, principal conductor of Portugal's Gulbenkian Orchestra.

She was given six hours with the orchestra in July to prove both herself and *Sappho*: "Probably the greatest six hours of my life," she says. "To finally hear what had been a pile of paper for 48 years. To hear 5000 Greek warriors approaching. To hear the colour of water. It was just indescribable. I just wanted to ring Peggy and tell her how wonderful it was."

Now everything is in place for the recording in Lisbon next July. The concert hall is booked. The orchestra and chorus have the score. The soloists have signed on to perform without fee.

But Condon still has one more task ahead: to raise the expected recording cost, €300,000 (\$396,972). "All my worldly savings have gone into this," Condon says. "It is an extraordinary amount for one 28-year-old Australian to come up with. I've found a couple of very generous sponsors, but I'm still looking. "

Details at [www.sappho.com.au](http://www.sappho.com.au).

<http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/music/nineyear-quest-fuelled-by-love-for-lost-opera-20111202-1ob0f.html#ixzz1fQ6ajgCp>

<http://www.theage.com.au/entertainment/music/nineyear-quest-fuelled-by-love-for-lost-opera-20111202-1ob0f.html>