

Reincarnations Pre-Concert

The work

When first approached by Graeme Morton in 2021 to write a large-scale work for the Brisbane Chamber Choir, the world was slowly emerging from the global pandemic. It is estimated that COVID 19 took the lives of around 15 million people around the globe. The pandemic had touched the lives of every single person living on the planet and in many ways changed the way that we now live, changed the social connections in our societies and most specifically, I believe, changed much of the way that we now perceive music and the arts. During the lockdowns the Arts became central to many people living in isolation as a way of dealing with the sense of loss of freedoms, loss of loved ones, loss of societal control, and in many, a deep sense of loneliness.

It was at this time that I started to think about the sort of piece that I wanted to write for this commission. Like many, I contracted COVID very early after its arrival in Australia, and I was fortunate to survive it at a time when very little was known about it. I did manage to come out the other side - but the journey through it did change the way that I viewed the world, - love, loss and life....and, it affected the way that I wanted to write my next large-scale work for choir.

After having had some success as a composer and a conductor for the four decades prior to the pandemic, post-pandemic, I found that the musical landscape had shifted as I had previously known it. Musical styles in composition, especially in choral music, I believe had become quite passive, easier to listen to, and music with limited emotional range. This created a dilemma for me and made me question the relevance of my musical language in the current “new world”.

Did I staying authentic and true to myself as a composer – did I write what people wanted to hear – did I write music in styles that would sell music – did I want people to like my music etc.? this was a quandary!

Thankfully, knowing that the commission was for the wonderful Brisbane Chamber Choir and my long-time colleague, Graeme Morton, I realised I would be supported in any style of composition I wished to compose, so decided to forge ahead and continue to develop my compositional style without compensation for stylistic change.

Finding the words.

About 30 years ago, when I was Composer in Residence at the St Peters Lutheran College in Indooroopilly, one of the many pieces I wrote was a little piece titled “Ross Roy” to a poem that had been written by the then Head of English at St Peters my good friend, Jane Greenwood.

This little piece so beautifully captured the historic architecture of the Ross Roy building on the grounds of the campus, and perhaps more significantly, not only the colours and shifting seasons of a century, but also the characters of the many students and staff who had passed through its doors. It is quite a reflective work and, in the recording, Jane read her poem over my music.

When I was thinking of poets and librettists, and trying to find the right words for the commission to match the energies and sentiments that I wanted to express, Jane immediately came to mind. When approached I was so pleased that she agreed to come with me on the journey of this piece. When I started to seriously put ideas together, I was living in Tasmania. I approached the BCC to help fly Jane to come down for a long weekend to stay at the B&B that I was running at the time, to flesh out ideas and get the project rolling.

After several decades of not seeing each other, Jane and I instantly reconnected. The conversations flowed easily over long lunches and aimless journeys out into the magnificent Tasmanian countryside. There were no immediate outcomes of text from this time of reflections and sharing stories, – but what did occur was a meeting of minds on the subjects that, post pandemic, played on our minds.

Neither of us are in our youth anymore so discussions revolved around our memories and events of our life’s journey – the loves, the losses, the cherished memories, and the ones we would rather forget. Even though the outcome of the 4 days did not produce immediate results, we both knew, however, that when we would be allowed to find our own artistic spaces the words, the shapes, the colours, the energies would come naturally and flow as a result of this time.

Over the next year or so, Jane in Brisbane and myself in Tasmania, I was sent many emails of text. Over time together we agreed on a structure very loosely based around the seven stages of grief, and after many back-wards and forward emails, I formulated a structure using selected texts from Jane’s output that I felt I could work with. It was a structure of text that left enough room for the

music to have a voice. The structure would very loosely be based on the seven stages of grief.

In choosing texts to set, I find it important to find words and phrases that allow the music and the setting to feel the weight of the intention to be interpreted rather than being simply stated – simple images and metaphors that capture the essence of an idea or emotion without having to be blunt as in “I love you.”

So, a working text was created...

Even though the texts expressed elements of our personal journeys - about love, loss and life, the work is not all doom and gloom, but rather a beautiful reflection of the joys and sorrows of life that we all experience.

The work.

The work is written for SATB choir, string quartet and a solo alto. I like to think of this work as choral/opera with the solo alto part taking on the voice of Jane herself. The choir then mostly assumes the role of setting the scenes, and the string quartet, as an abstract music maker, (the instruments that do not have words) taking the role of the emotional content.

This is perhaps the most personal piece that I have ever written as it attempts to express emotions and feelings that I have not had the opportunity to express up until now... It means so much to me that I know it was a very special process for both of us that brought this work to fruition.

The construction of the work.

Being such an extended work, I firstly needed to build the framework around which the music could sit. This was set in pace by the texts and the flow of movements.

Once the structure of the text was in place the time it took me to write the music was very intense and rapid. I often let the text and the structure sit with me for quite a while, perhaps over months and sometimes years, unconsciously allowing the materials and ideas to develop. The stimulus that drives the next phase of the process are the words, the images, a landscape, the colours, the energy - trusting my muse to guide me through the composition of the work. The writing phase for me is usually quite unconscious experience where I need to shut out the daily world and allow myself to live the feelings and emotions of the subject material and trust my compositional skills and imagination. Sometimes the subject is not tangible, sometimes the subject is right in front of

me, so often the subject needs to be imaginary to recreate the feeling and intensity of the words.

It is only after I have finished that I sometimes go back and look at what I have done.

As the work is written around emotional and physical themes, the harmonic language in this piece is perhaps less important to me than the motifs that emerge throughout the composition.

The role of the small interval motif at the very start of the piece like a pinpoint of light, is a single note that slowly grows and unravels then gradually opens out to a full sunlit room. Subtle word painting techniques are used through the development of the motifs.

The intention of the work

Without becoming too philosophical - what is left as those around us – those that mean a great deal in our lives, leave us – what is left as the memories slowly fade? What is left after the trauma of grief subsides?

No one else can experience what you feel, but everyone feels what you felt at some point in their lives, so the work is open to interpretation of these emotions based on a personal life journey.

The “seven stages of grief” are the very loose structure of the seven movements.

1. Shock and denial
2. Pain and guilt
3. Anger and bargaining
4. Depression, reflection, loneliness
5. Upward turn
6. Reconstruction
7. Acceptance and hope

1. Shock and denial

Listen...

– anger confusion, no understanding or comprehension of what is happening or happened.

Here the music opens with the searing sound of the two violins screaming in pain as they find their own rhythms - interweaving in and out, tumbling, scrambling to try and find the logic, to understand the pain of loss before the chords of the lower strings slowly pacify the

confusion of the energy to the point of a numbness, serene, out of body experience - the choir sings expressing the infinite universe and the shattering of time.

That feeling of time standing still – That feeling of the quote from “Funeral Blues” by W.H.Auden

*Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.*

Last verse

*The stars are not wanted now; put out every one,
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun,
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood;
For nothing now can ever come to any good.*

1. Pain and guilt De Profundis – “from the depths”
From the solemn footsteps of the strings come a sacred cry of appeal expressing deep feelings of sorrow or anguish.

Psalm 130

“Out of the depths I have cried to You, O Lord;
... hear my voice!
Let Your ears be attentive
To the voice of my supplications.”

The choir sings “the hour is darkest before dawn” ... referencing the quote from the English theologian and historian, Thomas Fuller - the notion that ‘the darkest hour is just before the dawn’ expresses the lowest point of sorrow yet, there is hope.

The images of life dissolving into air, the soul evaporating from life, yet there is hope and comfort that at dawn the sun will rise again – life goes on... which can be interpreted literally or metaphorically depending on your personal interpretations and beliefs.

2. Anger and bargaining Tipuana Blossoms
Why? Where? How?

Reflections of a life - the physical remnants of an existence remain prompting memories to start flooding thoughts and emotions.

How did that moment feel? What were the fragrances, the temperature, the colours of the world around you – often the most mundane things or insignificant things

3. Depression, reflection, and loneliness Kintsugi -

Kintsugi (Japanese, lit. 'golden joinery' or "golden repair"), is the Japanese art of repairing broken pottery by mending the areas of breakage with lacquer dusted or mixed with powdered gold, silver or platinum. As a philosophy, Kintsugi treats breakage and repair as part of the history of an object, rather than something to disguise.

How does one put the pieces back together of a fragile life?

This metaphor captures the mending by bringing the realities of life and mortality together with positivity and happy sadness. The pain of loss never goes away but memories create the threads are precious and allow the golden pieces of life to bond together.

4. The upward turn

Fleeting memories continue flooding back of a life past –tangible, emotive.....some of the memories are part of the textures but not necessarily discernable in the vocal clusters from the choir - images that speak directly of our Queensland lifestyle:

A childhood house, mango trees, fruit looking for all the world like snakes hanging from the boughs. In front, the brown river flows swiftly and sugar cane flowers wave in the humid air.

Autumn brings harvest festival, Pumpkins, oranges, apples and corn, All in the chancel of the little wooden church overhung with mango trees.

*Under the Mirani bridge there a beach, children paddle in the river,
daring brothers swim, little ones catch tadpoles in glass jars. There's gold
in that afternoon.*

The skies darken; it is night in the morning, The noise of the cyclone is a thunderclap. The rain is a deluge; it fills the air so breath is wet. The air swells with roofing iron torn from houses swirling, swirling.

*One person cottage. You can hear the birds but you cannot see them.
There is a peach tree. Possums eat peaches. Hot in summer, cold in
winter. Alone but not lonely, Here there is music.*

5. Reconstruction

The Wheel Turns

Time passes slowly, the seasons change, the numbness softens but the loss is never forgotten. Memories are cherished and held dear -

Finally....

6. Acceptance and hope.

Listen... for there is Music

As the images fade, the specific colours and textures become more distant, the sound of voices once so familiar fall silent, the faces become blurred in our minds eye – what lingers to the end? The music of our emotions, how we felt, how we loved, lost and lived remain with us all to the end. Listen... for there is music.