

## Roger Covell: The Go-between \*

*Vincent Plush*

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On a hot Sunday afternoon in December 1963, Peter Sculthorpe and Roger Covell drove to Castle Hill for lunch. Their host was Patrick White. It was not long before the 51-year-old writer and 34-year-old composer were planning projects together. In that relationship, Covell became the intermediary, a kind of go-between who negotiated the speed bumps over a testy and somewhat brief relationship-ride. For several decades, Covell remained a behind-the-scenes figure as Richard Meale and David Malouf proceeded to create the opera *Voss*, which premiered at the Adelaide Festival in March 1986. This article examines the role that Covell had in the creation of what many hoped would come to be regarded as ‘the great Australian opera.’

White had been curious to meet Sculthorpe, who had recently arrived from Launceston to take up an appointment at the University of Sydney. Covell had recommended Sculthorpe to Professor Donald Peart, foundation Professor of Music at the University of Sydney. Covell had written favourable reviews of Sculthorpe’s music and White had asked him for an introduction. ‘Bring Sculthorpe out to lunch some day,’ was the instruction.

Patrick White had an ulterior motive for wanting to meet Peter Sculthorpe. The author was looking for a composer. He had written the libretto for an opera, or thought he had. It was based on the story of Eliza Fraser, the shipwrecked Englishwoman who survived some years in the mangrove swamps of Queensland. The opening of the Sydney Opera House was

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imminent (at least, everyone hoped it was), and what White described as ‘the best goddam opera house in the world’ would need an opera of appropriate import and lustre to send it on its way. He had written the libretto (or thought he had), his mate Sidney Nolan would do the décor and Stefan Haag would direct. All that was needed was ... the composer.

Initially, White set his sights high. Stravinsky had visited Sydney in late 1961. White went to his concerts and even sat next to him at an after-concert dinner in Woollahra mounted by Lady Hannah Lloyd-Jones, widow of Sir Charles Lloyd-Jones, whose forebears had founded David Jones, the upmarket department store in Sydney. It was clear to the 50-year-old writer that Stravinsky, ‘the dear old thing,’ was neither interested, nor appropriate. White went down his wish list of international composers; librettos were dispatched to Benjamin Britten and, possibly, William Walton, Aaron Copland and Leonard Bernstein. Who in the operatic Anglosphere would not want to be involved in a project that would open ‘the best opera house in the world’?

In particular, White held great hopes for Britten. They had a mutual friend in Nolan, and White hoped to meet Britten when he travelled to Europe in 1963. He asked Covell for an address to which he could send Britten his ‘libretto.’ By this time, Covell was arguably the pre-eminent Britten expert in Australia. He had given Australian premieres of Britten operas; in Sydney, he had welcomed the English Opera Group when they visited Australia with Britten’s three Church Parables in March 1970, and during this time he had shown Britten over the almost-complete Sydney Opera House. With Nolan and Covell on his side, White was confident that the composer most likely to be interested in his libretto—the pre-eminent composer of opera working in the English language, no less—would leap at the opportunity to set his libretto. In Aldeburgh, they met briefly. The meeting did not go well; Britten was far too busy with other composition projects and conducting, and seemed quite uninterested. Britten’s name was removed from White’s list.

As early as February 1963, White had had his eye on an opera which would open ‘the best opera house in the world’, news that he relayed in a letter to Ben Huebsch, his publisher in New York:

The Elizabethan Theatre Trust has asked me to consider writing the libretto for an opera to open the Sydney Opera House. I have an idea [to adapt *The Fringe of Leaves*, a project which White had temporarily abandoned], but it will depend on whether I can accept the composer. There are some truly dreadful ones at large.<sup>1</sup>

A month later, architect Joern Utzon personally escorted White around the shell of the construction site of the Opera House. White was barely able to contain himself:

It has made me feel glad I am in Australia today. At last we are going to have something worth having. If only they had got going on the whole thing a few years earlier, so that we could be certain of having a part in it!<sup>2</sup>

Mrs Fraser was quintessentially an *Australian* opera, with an Australian theme and, its author had hoped, an entirely Australian team, befitting the opening of ‘the best opera house in the world.’ The creative team was shaping up: the librettist, the designer, the director and—I

<sup>1</sup> Patrick White, letter to Ben Huebsch, 17 Feb. 1963; quoted in David Marr, ed., *Patrick White: Letters* (Milsons Point, NSW: Random House Australia, 1994) 219.

<sup>2</sup> Patrick White, letter to Desmond Digby, 15 Mar. 1963; quoted in Marr, *Letters*, 223.

suspect—in his mind, White had already cast Marie Collier in the lead role. He had admired her singing and acting in Walton's *Troilus and Cressida* at the 1964 Adelaide Festival. All that was lacking in his opera project was the composer and there was one at hand, as Covell recalled:

My reviews of Peter Sculthorpe's music in the 1960s may have helped to arouse Patrick's interest in the idea of Peter being the person he would select to compose the music for his libretto. I use that phrasing deliberately. Patrick's idea of the composer's task was that such a person would set the author's text as it stood and would be honoured to do so.<sup>3</sup>

Covell had indeed written good things about the promising composer from Launceston. White's other 'guides to music' (as he called them) were the music critics and translators of his work into German, Curt and Maria Prerauer. They agreed with Covell's assessment and amplified the case: Peter Sculthorpe, they told him, was 'the real thing.'

The trip from Sydney's eastern suburbs to Castle Hill along Parramatta Road took about an hour. This was a fine day; Sculthorpe took the roof down on his new possession, a bright red Karmann Ghia sports car. The Ghia earned him the White sobriquet of 'The Scarlet Playboy' or 'slimy Sculthorpe.' Before long, White was referring to Sculthorpe in even more disparaging terms. In the eighth of his *Nine Thoughts from Sydney* (1970), White composed lines that denigrated Sculthorpe's music as little more than background music:

Mrs de Tintacks in her tiny Bondi shack  
(a Dobell in the dunny, Sculthorpe piped above the sink)  
Watches her Poseidons rise.  
Seed pearls grate beneath her eyelids as  
She reaches out and turns the butler on.<sup>4</sup>

On that bright Sunday afternoon in December 1963, White was on his best behaviour. Although he could not drive and knew next to nothing about cars, he admired the vehicle and complimented its driver. White had gone to great lengths to prepare a Greek meat dish for lunch for the occasion. At the table were just Sculthorpe and Covell, along with White himself and his life partner Manoly Lascaris. It was more 'a working business lunch,' Covell recalled.<sup>5</sup> But Sculthorpe had not told White that he was a vegetarian. 'Many thanks for your tolerance of my tardy confession of my regular/vegetarian habits,' he wrote to the author somewhat sheepishly.<sup>6</sup>

Even so, the meal went well enough, White reported to Geoffrey Dutton two days later.<sup>7</sup> Inspired by the experience of hearing the Australian premiere of Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* a few years earlier, White found himself wanting to write a song cycle:<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Roger Covell, email to author, 22 Dec. 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Cited in Paul Brennan, ed., *Patrick White Speaks* (Sydney: Primavera Press, 1989) 25.

<sup>5</sup> Covell, conversation with author, Apr. 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Sculthorpe, letter to Patrick White, 7 Dec. 1963; Papers of Peter Sculthorpe, National Library of Australia, MS 9676.

<sup>7</sup> Patrick White, letter to Geoffrey Dutton, 5 Dec. 1963; cited in Marr, *Letters*, 245.

<sup>8</sup> On 23 September 1959, White wrote to his bank manager friend Frederick Glover: 'The poems themselves are terribly dull but I would prefer to hear it done by somebody else before deciding whether I like it. At the Conservatorium, I found the *Sprechstimme* terribly distracting; it wouldn't allow me to listen to the music, which sounded interesting.' Patrick White, letter to Frederick Glover, 23 Sept. 1959; Papers of David Marr, National Library of Australia, MS 9356/16/44.

All Sunday we drove to Mount Wilson and back it wouldn't leave me alone, and I wrote it down on Sunday night after we got back: it is called *Six Urban Songs*. I suppose really they arise from my disappointment at the inability of most people to understand [my play] *A Cheery Soul*, and there is more than a little spleen in them.

A very curious coincidence: the day after, [Roger] Covell brought Peter Sculthorpe to lunch to discuss the possibility of an opera. In the course of conversation, Sculthorpe said he had been commissioned by a Melbourne group to compose a song cycle, but that he didn't know where he was going to find the words. I was able to say that I had them! However, he has still to see them, as I wanted to have another look before typing them out. I said I heard them being sung by a baritone and a soprano with fairly rich orchestral accompaniment, his idea was something for soprano – some Tasmanian he knows. But I doubt whether 'a Tasmanian lass' would be able to get some of the words past her lips, which is where the baritone would come in. We also talked about the possibility of the Mrs Fraser theme as an opera. He is not very happy at the thought of what he calls a 'historical' opera. I explained that my approach is not historical at all, that I deal with states of mind, and that the content is very contemporary, although in a Victorian setting ... I asked him in what way he thought we should collaborate, and he said he would like me to start by writing a play. So this is right into my hand, and I think something may come of it. I had always been appalled by the prospect of tailoring lines to a composer's music without first getting the dramatic framework and the story consolidated.<sup>9</sup>

On the drive back into town, Sculthorpe was upbeat, Covell reported. He had just met the writer of two novels that were important to him in his burgeoning vision of Australian identity: *Voss* and *Riders in the Chariot*. He was excited that Patrick White, almost at his peak as a nationally recognised writer, would provide him with texts for his next composition project. Knowing both parties reasonably well, Covell was more circumspect. 'Careful this doesn't come back to bite you,' he counselled.<sup>10</sup>

The texts of the *Urban Songs* arrived by mail within a week. Also included was the libretto of White's 'opera.' Sculthorpe had suggested White write it in the form of a play but it arrived in prose form, with barely a hint of poetry. Sculthorpe read its pages with increasing dismay and horror. He found himself unable to set lines like the moan between two soldiers, new arrivals in the colony of New South Wales: 'I caught the fuckn' pox in Sydney.' How might Aaron Copland and other internationally known composers have responded to lines like that, Sculthorpe wondered.

The opera script could hardly have prepared Sculthorpe for the texts of the *Urban Songs*. White had sent them to *Quadrant*, amongst others. Its editor, James McAuley thought they were 'dreadful rubbish,' Covell reported, and that the magazine 'couldn't possibly publish them.'<sup>11</sup> White had also sent the texts of the *Songs* on to Britten; as was his custom, they were returned, politely and without comment. In the third song, 'Song of the Housewives,' Sculthorpe read lines he could not possibly contemplate setting to music:

We are happy! We are happy!  
Why shouldn't we be? We have ev-rything:

<sup>9</sup> Patrick White, letter to Geoffrey Dutton, 5 Dec. 1963; cited in Marr, *Letters*, 245.

<sup>10</sup> Covell, conversation with author, Apr. 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Covell, email to author, 6 Apr. 2016.

The Bendix, the Dishlex,  
 The Mixmaster, and the Holden Special,  
 We have the telly to replace our thoughts.  
 Oh, the Telly, the Telly!<sup>12</sup>

White had another suggestion for the *Urban Songs*: had Sculthorpe ever heard the voice of Maria Prerauer? Prerauer had not sung in public for many years; she was better known as a gossip arts columnist in Sydney-based journals and newspapers. She had earlier been a well-regarded mezzo-soprano who had briefly taken over the role of Marie in the first run of a staged production of *Wozzeck* at Covent Garden. Prerauer told White that his texts made her feel 'she would like to return' to public performances again.<sup>13</sup> 'She certainly has a well-developed sense of irony,' the author confided to his would-be composer, 'which is what they need,'

and if she has sung roles like Isolde, Elektra and Marie she must have quite a voice.  
 But whoever sings them, I hope you will go ahead with the music if you feel you want to. It will help us approach the opera.<sup>14</sup>

Respectful of the protocol between all parties, Sculthorpe wrote to Prerauer who confirmed she would indeed be interested in the songs. Sculthorpe wrote back to White with the news. But already there were disturbing signs in the wind: it soon became clear that White had already 'composed' the songs in his imagination, just as he had 'created' screenplays, set and costume designs, and had 'cast' actors, actresses and directors for film projects, notably and most tragically for *Voss*.<sup>15</sup> In effect, White was giving Sculthorpe a composition lesson:

I don't think it necessary to have a chorus if you feel it will jeopardise the work's chances of being performed. But I do think a fairly large orchestra is *necessary* to bring out what is there. I also feel two voices, preferably soprano and baritone, would have to be used. I think one soprano could do 'Song of the Housewives' if the music helps her with the right [kind of] chattery-nattery, twittery-jittery tones. Perhaps here and there a rumble from the baritone would help—to introduce *Angst*. (However, please disregard any of this if you don't like it, or find it corny. The composer is the one who matters.)<sup>16</sup>

Despite that disclaimer, White was clearly an auteur who required control of every dimension of his projects. 'We got together too late,' the author admitted to his London agent, 'and by that time the idea had set too rigidly in my mind [for me] to be able to satisfy a collaborator.'<sup>17</sup> White had come to the conclusion that Sculthorpe was 'a lightweight dabbler

<sup>12</sup> As fate would have it, these words *did* find their way into the Concert Hall of the Sydney Opera House, as Moya Henderson's settings of White's *Six Urban Songs*, with the British soprano Elizabeth Harwood singing with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra in April 1986.

<sup>13</sup> Maria Prerauer, letter to Patrick White, 13 Aug. 1963; Papers of Curt & Maria Prerauer, National Library of Australia, MS 10040, Series 4, Folder 2.

<sup>14</sup> Patrick White, letter to Peter Sculthorpe, 21 Dec. 1963; Papers of David Marr, National Library of Australia MS 9356/18/21.

<sup>15</sup> To date, there have been at least three attempts to make a film version of *Voss*: by Ken Russell, Joseph Losey and Stuart Cooper. All have foundered on White's insistence over right-of-veto over the director.

<sup>16</sup> Patrick White, letter to Peter Sculthorpe, 21 Dec. 1963; Papers of Peter Sculthorpe, National Library of Australia, Manuscripts Collection, MS 9676/5/80; cited in Marr, *Letters*, 246–7.

<sup>17</sup> Patrick White, letter to Juliet O'Hea, 20 Apr. 1964; cited in David Marr, *Patrick White: A Life* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1991) 435. O'Hea was White's formidable agent in the London office of Curtis Brown from 1941 until her retirement in 1975.

who would not amount to anything.’ When he was first introduced to Sidney Nolan, Sculthorpe recalled in his autobiography, the painter reported that White had derided him as ‘that ageing social lion who also writes music.’<sup>18</sup>

White’s venomous estimation of Sculthorpe vented over the tight-knit artist circles of Sydney’s eastern suburbs. Margery Williams was a literary hostess who worked for the British Council in Edgecliff. A friend of both the writer and composer, she received a special blast of gossip from White:

Sculthorpe has become quite brazen in his importunings. Recently, before a Youth Concert at which one of his works was going to be performed, he rang up Curt Prerauer and asked him whether he was going to give him a good review. Curt replied he was not reviewing Youth Concerts. Then, at a seminar of children’s music, a choral work by Sculthorpe was performed, with words by Covell, and the choir directed by Covell’s girl friend.<sup>19</sup> I have succeeded in retrieving the [texts of *the Six Urban Songs*] I gave S[culthorpe] some time ago, although he claims plaintively to have composed five of the six. Maria says I should ask to see the music and have Curt present. And now [Sir Bernard] Heinze has commissioned him to compose some music for the Commonwealth Festival and there is a big ganging up so that they shall all get into the Opera House.<sup>20</sup>

By the time of the opening concert of the Commonwealth Arts Festival in London on 30 September 1965, Sir Bernard Heinze had fallen ill and his place on the podium was taken by the ABC’s Director of Music, John Hopkins. Hopkins had arrived in Sydney in 1963 and quickly became a proponent of Sculthorpe’s music. Scanning London’s bleak weather for some Australian sunshine, Covell reported to his readers in the *Sydney Morning Herald* that concertgoers had struggled through heavy rain and a traffic jam to get to the Royal Festival Hall. Even so, Sculthorpe’s *Sun Music* ‘received the most encouraging and unanimous reception of a new work during the whole festival.’<sup>21</sup> The following day, Peter Grose reported in the *Australian* somewhat differently: Sculthorpe’s new piece, he wrote, was ‘a flop’, the Royal Festival Hall was only two-thirds full and the piece drew ‘only a polite response.’<sup>22</sup>

Some years later, just before White’s death in September 1990, Sculthorpe considered setting some of the texts White had created for their Mrs Fraser opera. For a while, he considered dedicating this new work for voice and piano to White but decided not to proceed. He feared the ailing author would see this as an attempt to regain their sundered friendship. ‘Any such attempt was far from my mind,’ Sculthorpe maintained later. ‘I dearly hoped, though, that our relationship could have arrived at some kind of civil resolution.’<sup>23</sup>

In May 2009, *The Voss Journey* took shape in Canberra. By this time, Sculthorpe had made his peace with Patrick White, some two decades after the writer’s death. In response to my

<sup>18</sup> Peter Sculthorpe, *Sun Music* (Sydney: ABC Books, 1999) 71.

<sup>19</sup> Sculthorpe’s *South by Five* (1965) for girls’ voices and instruments, to a text by Roger Covell, was first performed on 21 May 1965 by the Cremorne Girls High School Choir, directed by Merle Berriman (later Covell’s wife). This was part of a UNESCO Conference on School Music held at the NSW State Conservatorium of Music.

<sup>20</sup> Patrick White, letter to Margery Williams, 11 July 1965; Papers of David Marr, National Library of Australia.

<sup>21</sup> Roger Covell, ‘Orchestra Assertive,’ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 Oct. 1965. Note that Sculthorpe’s title has yet to acquire the numeral #1; he would compose its three successors over the ensuing four years.

<sup>22</sup> Peter Grose, ‘Flop for Festival Finale,’ *The Australian*, 2 Oct. 1965.

<sup>23</sup> Sculthorpe, *Sun Music*, 80.

request for a short work for a concert of music based on White texts, Sculthorpe composed a short song cycle for soprano voice and piano, with the vocal part marked 'very subdued, with a minimum of expression.' Sculthorpe himself adapted the White originals for the work he called *Patrick White Fragments*, two pages of poem-sketches that had found their way from White's Olivetti to Sculthorpe's piano-stand as sketches for the Mrs Fraser opera. It was a very laborious, almost painful process. Sculthorpe struggled for several months with what would normally have been a relatively simple task; only once did he reveal the reason, 'It hurts,' he said, ruefully.<sup>24</sup> Before setting these texts to music, Sculthorpe made 'very considerable' adjustments to them. Like so many other White texts, these tiny fragments could not be set in quite their original form:

She lay on a skeleton of leaves,  
 After we had made love.  
 Leaves and lilies, dark and wet,  
 On the rain-forest floor.

[From *Mrs Fraser Song II*]

Bury me not so deep,  
 That I cannot feel the touch of leaves,  
 The bark of great straight trees,  
 And the tall trees and the gaunt ones.  
 And those that shed: their strips of skin,  
 And those that stand so smooth in dawn,  
 But straight, straight and strong,  
 Standing straight and strong, and strong.

[From *Mrs Fraser Song I*]

The water trickles down her body  
 Down between her breasts!  
 The waxen, flaxen flesh and waterlilies!  
 Her life springs from the skeleton of leaves!  
  
 And where do light and water end,  
 And where do I begin?  
 I could not die, yes,  
 And now, I will.<sup>25</sup>

Mrs Fraser had been the bond that had drawn Sculthorpe and White together almost a half century earlier. Back then, by April 1964, White realised he would not approach an opera again. He had wanted 'an opera that would create a bit of a storm,' Covell suggested recently, 'something subject to dispute and shock.' Like the operas of Berg and Schoenberg (commended

<sup>24</sup> Peter Sculthorpe, conversation with author, Apr. 2008.

<sup>25</sup> Text by Patrick White, as re-arranged by Peter Sculthorpe for his *Patrick White Fragments* (2009) based on *Eliza Fraser Songs* by White. The original version of *Patrick White Fragments* was performed by Rebecca Collins (soprano), Alan Hicks (piano) with Vincent Plush (speaker), in the National Portrait Gallery, Canberra, 15 May 2009, as part of *The Voss Journey*. Papers of Peter Sculthorpe, National Library of Australia, MS 9676/5/81.

to him by the Prerauers), White's opera—there was never any doubt in his mind it would be *his* opera—would 'disturb the populace', as his novels and plays had done.<sup>26</sup> *The Fringe of Leaves* was re-fashioned from his opera libretto and became White's tenth novel, published in 1976 by Jonathan Cape. Two decades later, as *Voss* approached its operatic premiere in Adelaide, its author poured scorn on it. It was no longer *his* opera. It was now the child of Meale and Malouf.

For his part, even with White out of the picture, Sculthorpe still had an opera to write: a commission from the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust (AETT). On 5 June 1965, a titbit of gossip had appeared in the *Australian*, under the byline Martin Collins:<sup>27</sup>

Sculthorpe wants a simple libretto and Patrick White's first drafts are said to be nothing like that. White has been replaced by historian Alan Moorehead and critic Roger Covell.<sup>28</sup>

On 30 July 1965, Covell received a letter from Stefan Haag, then the Executive Director of the AETT, confirming the commission as co-writer (with Alan Moorehead) of a libretto for an opera by Peter Sculthorpe. It was accompanied by a cheque for £100, one half of his fee. Covell had supplied words for several Sculthorpe compositions, songs and choral pieces like *South by Five*. Even so, he was not persuaded by what his composer friend was saying he wanted in his 'opera.' Reflecting on *Mrs Fraser*, Roger Covell wrote to Sculthorpe in 1966:

you spoke of your strong desire to write a straightforward opera ... with plenty of sustained opportunities for singing and tunes that one might reasonably hope to remember. It was in relation to these considerations that I had always been slightly uneasy about *Mrs Fraser*. At the time you seemed to be brimming over with ideas about atmospheric sounds<sup>29</sup> ... but to be rather vague about the place of *the sung word* in opera.<sup>30</sup>

Covell had come to the conclusion that the work Sculthorpe wanted to write to fulfill his AETT commission—the work that eventually became *Rites of Passage* after he had been through six librettists—would become 'something like a ballet, perhaps like *Les Noces*.' Sculthorpe's new orchestral and choral sounds, he thought, were more 'part of a sound-action, but not a verbal or narrative action.' After White's involvement had dissolved, Covell, Sculthorpe and Alan Moorehead made a foray to Fraser Island 'to get the feel of the place.' A little earlier, Covell had visited Moorehead in Italy; Moorehead was very keen on the project. It meant a great deal to him to move away from his customary terrain of what Covell describes as his 'excellent historical books' into the world of fantasy and fiction that an opera libretto would allow.<sup>31</sup>

Eventually, Moorehead became the victim of a failed medical procedure in London, and his name disappeared from this narrative altogether.<sup>32</sup> The *Mrs Fraser* story never entirely left

<sup>26</sup> Covell, email to author, 6 Apr. 2016.

<sup>27</sup> A pseudonym (possibly Martin Long), combining the names of the major streets of Sydney and Melbourne, Martin Place and Collins Street.

<sup>28</sup> Martin Collins, *The Australian*, 5 June 1965; cited in Deborah Hayes, *Peter Sculthorpe: A Bio-Bibliography* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1993) 160.

<sup>29</sup> These 'atmospheric sounds', inspired by the new orchestral writing of such composers as Penderecki and Lutoslawski, emerged in Sculthorpe's *Sun Music* series, I–IV and the *Sun Music* ballet, the music of which was created between 1965 and 1968.

<sup>30</sup> Papers of Peter Sculthorpe, National Library of Australia, MS 9676/5/16. Emphasis added.

<sup>31</sup> Covell, conversation with author, 4 Mar. 2016.

<sup>32</sup> Moorehead's manuscript libretto is preserved in Sculthorpe's archive in the National Library of Australia, MS 9676/5150.

Sculthorpe.<sup>33</sup> Over a decade, he would go through six librettists until he eventually concluded he should write his own libretto. His ritual dance theatre piece, *Rites of Passage*, appeared in mid-1974, a year late for the opening of 'the best opera house in the world.'

Sculthorpe's *Rites of Passage* was not directed by anyone associated with opera, but by the choreographer Jaap Flier, leader of the Australian Dance Theatre based in Adelaide. Flier drew out the full ritualistic core of the piece. It was largely word-less, in a conventional operatic sense, and drew adverse criticism from Maria Prerauer and others; to them, it challenged the very definition of opera. 'Rites: not an opera!' ran one newspaper heading. It is worth reflecting that Sculthorpe's not-an-opera appeared a full year before the first of the 'ritual operas' of Philip Glass and Robert Wilson, *Einstein on the Beach*.<sup>34</sup> The initial response to *Rites* obscured its true lineage as a precursor to the ritual/dance/theatre pieces of Glass and Wilson.<sup>35</sup>

By the mid-1960s, Roger Covell was firmly established as the leading music critic in the country. He had moved from Brisbane to Sydney in 1960 to become music and theatre critic of the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Previously, he had spent three years in London working 'in the background' in music and drama at the BBC and in London theatre. His time at the *Herald* got off to a good start. Aside of trips to Adelaide for the Festival, one of his earlier assignments was to report on the concerts of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra in London and Edinburgh in 1965. This became part of a three-month trip which took him from Moscow, across Europe, to the United States of America.

Overall, Covell and the *Herald* enjoyed each other's company. When John Pringle, editor of the *Herald*, got wind of the possibility of Covell applying for a position at the University of Melbourne, he was alarmed. 'I need hardly tell you that I would regard this as a major disaster for the Herald,' he wrote to Covell. 'Please do not go.'

I realise, however, that you have financial problems to think about and I have recommended that your salary be raised to £3,000 a year at once ... I think it is only fair to add that with this rise we should want to cut down on payment for extra contributions. In general, I will consider your salary would cover all your work for us at the *Herald* though we might make exceptions for a special piece which required a lot of your time.<sup>36</sup>

At that point, Covell became the only critic in the country to be put on a retainer.

Covell did not go to Melbourne. In 1966, he applied for the position of Senior Lecturer, the first position in Music at the University of New South Wales. He remained at the University of New South Wales until 2004, but beyond that still attended to the programmes and annotations for the Australia Ensemble in a part-time capacity until 2012.

<sup>33</sup> Mrs Fraser surfaced again in 1980 with the small-scale music theatre piece for soprano, flute and piano *Eliza Fraser Sings* (1978) to a text by the blind poet, Barbara Blackman: *Eliza Survivor* [sic]. The Australian premiere was given by The Seymour Group at Sydney University on 1 July 1978.

<sup>34</sup> *Einstein on the Beach* premiered at the Avignon Festival in France on 25 July 1976, and in November that year appeared at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York. Its Australian premiere was at the Melbourne International Festival in September 1992. Initially Glass had decided not to go to Melbourne, but he did, after his attention had been drawn to the connection between Neville Shute's novel *On the Beach* and the title of his opera.

<sup>35</sup> Covell was overseas at the time, so did not see this production.

<sup>36</sup> John Pringle, memorandum to Roger Covell, 2 June 1965; Papers of Roger Covell, National Library of Australia, MS Acc 14.451, Box 2, Bag 4.

In his very early career, Covell was a book reviewer and occasional editorial writer for the *Courier Mail* in Brisbane. He had read White's novels, most memorably the fourth published novel *The Tree of Man*, first published in 1955. He did not much care for it. He disliked 'the way White had smashed the sentences into small bits.'<sup>37</sup> In his dual capacity as a music and theatre critic, Covell had seen the three White plays produced by the University of Adelaide Theatre Guild in the early 1960s. In *Quadrant* (April–May 1964), he reviewed the Guild's premiere production of White's second play *The Season at Sarsaparilla*. He could find 'no fault in it at all' and it has remained a favourite to this day.<sup>38</sup>

[Its] rowdy, rasping vitality of language in and its sheer affluence of material will probably combine to give it the untidy but exhilarating inclusiveness of some of the longer Mahler symphonies. It is a play big enough in conception to break a multitude of rules.<sup>39</sup>

White was pleased to read Covell's carefully measured, positive reviews. It compensated for the sometimes testy utterances of the *Herald's* other drama critic Harry Kippax, White's least favourite critic.

At some point, White decided that Covell, still in his mid-thirties, needed assistance in negotiating the fundamentals and pitfalls of the world of letters in Sydney. Covell described his relationship with White as 'an odd one,' particularly in the 1960s:

Patrick seemed to feel that, as a relative youngster, I needed detailed guidance in how to keep my awareness of the world beyond music in order. He took to ringing me at fairly regular intervals at 7.30 in the morning. I would be woken from sleep (usually after a late night in filing a review at the *Sydney Morning Herald*) and would try to sound as if I was reasonably alert. Then followed a full half-hour of intellectual and artistic guidance. He told me which films I should see, which books I should read, which theatre performances I should attend, and so on. As an admirer of the vision behind his books, I listened with the greatest respect and in virtual silence. Whenever I tried to make a small comment, Patrick would plough on determinedly with his next recommendation or instruction. Then, when he considered his task was complete, he would ring off with the briefest of farewells, leaving me in a state of numbed satiety while recognising that his impulse was a mixture of opinionated overlordship and generosity.<sup>40</sup>

Covell was only one of a number of people who endured and survived White's war-by-telephone. Maie Casey, wife of the Governor General, was another; she was allocated the weekly timeslot of 9.00 am on Sunday mornings. Their conversations were peppered by mysterious clicks which White interpreted as ASIO agents listening in to their confidences. Then there was his old friend, the opera director and set designer Desmond Digby, most weekday mornings at 9.00 am. 'For years,' David Marr reports in his biography of White, 'the two men had "a good old yell-and-shout" on the phone every day before breakfast.' White did not know that Digby

<sup>37</sup> Covell, conversation with author, Sydney, 6 Apr. 2016.

<sup>38</sup> *The Season at Sarsaparilla* opened at the Union Hall at the University of Adelaide on 14 September 1962. John Tasker directed this production for the University of Adelaide Theatre Guild. Desmond Digby did the stage designs.

<sup>39</sup> Roger Covell, 'Patrick White's Plays,' *Quadrant* (Apr–May 1964): 11.

<sup>40</sup> Covell, email to author, 22 Dec. 2015.

was making notes of their conversations.<sup>41</sup> 'Often, the little index cards simply record where White was that morning on the Richter scale,' Marr writes. "'Furious!!'" "Big Explosion."<sup>42</sup>

Covell did not reciprocate those tutorials from White. He did not loan White books on music (Sculthorpe had loaned White books about Berg, and about Strauss and Britten and their librettists). Covell did not recommend recordings White should purchase nor concerts or opera productions he should attend. (As it happened, White attended most of these events anyway, especially operas and contemporary music concerts.) The collection of concert programmes White retained from events in the 1970s and '80s suggests that he must have heard almost every note of new music played in Sydney over the last twenty or so years of his life.<sup>43</sup> Covell felt that he and White were usually in agreement with his critical assessment of things.

There is no doubt that Patrick was keenly alert to musical values. His opinions about the merits of individual composers, however, were sometimes unduly sensitive to current estimates at the high end of fashion.<sup>44</sup>

Surprisingly, Covell's book *Australia's Music: Themes of a New Society* (1967) does not appear in the inventory of White's library, acquired by the Mitchell Library. (It is hard to believe that White did not at least read it; his library contained histories of Australian art and film, as well as discourses on fashion, horticulture and, of course, dogs and cuisine. It is odd that it did not contain what was widely regarded as the only credible book on music in Australia at that time.) On their few meetings in the foyers of concert halls, Covell's book was not discussed. Covell recalls having been a dinner guest at White's home in Centennial Park, Sydney, only once; they could hardly have been regarded as social intimates. For the next fifteen years or so, the relationship seems to have tapered off. At least Covell was not consigned to the roster of sundered friendships and enemies as were other one-time friends, people such as Sidney Nolan, Manning Clark, Geoffrey Dutton, Barry Humphries, Joan Sutherland and Maria Prerauer.

Preparing for its operatic appearance, *Voss* emerged again in 1979. In its film guise, Johann Ulrich Voss had been lost in the desert of inertia and government funding strictures since the late 1950s, about the time when White first started talking about his fifth novel as a film. Around 1979, Peter Hemmings, then the General Manager of the Australian Opera, read White's novel. He soon came to the opinion that it was the perfect operatic vehicle for Richard Meale. Hemmings also determined that David Malouf, himself a violinist and writer about opera, should create the libretto for Meale. Though he would have no part of it, White gave the project his blessing, in general but somewhat sceptical terms.

In 1973, Moya Henderson had approached White to write an opera, or music theatre piece, based on *Voss* and White had given her his blessing. Doubtless, after studying with Kagel in Cologne, she would have produced the sort of astringent modernist score White had clattering in his head. Such a score, though, would hardly suit the national opera company. Initially, Meale thought that *Voss* could not be made into an opera, but Malouf and Covell persuaded him otherwise. Covell reported:

<sup>41</sup> Letters of Desmond Digby (1933–2015), National Library of Australia, MS 10056.

<sup>42</sup> David Marr, 'Patrick White: The Final Chapter,' *The Monthly* (Apr. 2008): 23, <[www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2008/april/1347407035/david-marr/patrick-white](http://www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2008/april/1347407035/david-marr/patrick-white)>.

<sup>43</sup> Patrick White Bequest Collection, Mitchell Library, Sydney.

<sup>44</sup> Covell, email to author, 22 Dec. 2015.

It is no surprise, then, that Patrick wished the music of any opera set to his words or to any adaptation of his words to be in the front line of current modernity or, if not in that category, to be the work of a master. He wanted any opera with which he was associated to create a sensation and then to be recognised, of course, as a classic of the future. It was in that spirit that he accepted the proposal of Richard Meale for making an opera out of White's novel *Voss*. Meale's deserved reputation as a fearless modernist in the Australian scene would have earned him this approval. Unfortunately, from Patrick's point of view, Meale seemed, at the time he was writing the music for *Voss* the opera ... to be retracing his steps in a direction away from currently recognised modernism. He delighted in playing passages from the score on the piano to Patrick with an obvious relish in their tunefulness and emotional warmth. Patrick's opinion of them, however, as expressed to me, was a mixture of indulgence and impatience. He thought they totally lacked the red-hot animation of style he had expected from Richard.<sup>45</sup>

*Voss* was meant to be the cornerstone of the Adelaide Festival in March 1982, but the score was not ready in time. Instead, in the context of a fiftieth-birthday concert for Meale, performed by the Australian Youth Orchestra, a seventeen-minute excerpt from the opera, the so-called *Garden Scene*, was performed. Covell's estimation reflected the general opprobrium (and relief) at the appearance of this segment. It was a tantalizing glimpse of what would come four years later:

It is more beautiful, more grateful for the voices and more genuinely operatic than most people would have dared to hope.<sup>46</sup>

White attended the 1982 Adelaide Festival, which was directed by his friend and exponent Jim Sharman. He was present for the premiere of his newly commissioned play *Signal Driver*, and he attended the concert where that performance of the excerpt from *Voss* was premiered. He found *The Garden Scene* very beautiful, even though, he protested, he had never written anything called 'The Garden Scene.' Writing to Meale less than a week after the first performance of *Voss* in Adelaide, White found it necessary to remind the composer that, as he remembered it, *Voss* was 'austere and gritty, even in that gentler scene.'<sup>47</sup> The singers also were 'wrong, the man (Gregory Yurisich) downright bad, the woman (Marilyn Richardson) too mellifluously perfect.' He could not imagine them 'ever developing human passions.' They were like 'two giant waxwork figures standing there on the platform.' No doubt, White admitted, 'these bad impressions will be corrected when the whole work is heard as an opera and not a static concert piece.' Meale was a composer White had come to admire, and he hoped he would 'bring it off':

My disappointment is that you haven't composed a contemporary opera, instead [you have created] a romantic work based on the hateful *Voss*.

Meale defended his setting of the scene, but White was determined to have the last word. For all his misgivings, he wished the work 'a tremendous success':

a success I shall enjoy, even when the members of the establishment, the company directors, and their vacant women are madly clapping something they don't understand.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Covell, email to author, 22 Dec. 2015.

<sup>46</sup> Roger Covell, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 Mar. 1982.

<sup>47</sup> Patrick White, letter to Richard Meale, 9 Mar. 1982; cited in Marr, *A Life*, 610.

<sup>48</sup> White, letter to Meale, 9 Apr. 1982. Cited in Marr, *A Life*, 610.

As *Voss* neared its premiere at the Adelaide Festival in March 1986, Covell was one of the behind-the-scenes characters quietly helping to bring it to fruition. He and Malouf discussed the shape of the libretto and dramaturgy, especially the problematic structure of the second act. In particular, Covell and Dominick Argento, the American composer who had written several operas and who was a friend of Malouf, felt that *Voss* should re-appear in the final scene because, they reasoned, a long epilogue without its eponymous leading male would be problematic when presented on stage. Meale and Malouf toyed with the idea, but Sharman rejected it outright, so it remained unperformed. *Voss* does reappear at the close of the opera, of course, but eulogized as a mute statue.<sup>49</sup>

Patrick White did not attend the Adelaide premiere in March 1986. He was annoyed that 'the Queen of England'—he refused to acknowledge her as 'the Queen of Australia'—would be attending that Festival, in the 150th year of the proclamation of the State of South Australia. (Curiously, her schedule allowed her to attend the premiere of *Boojum!* by the Wesley-Smith twins, local boys-made-good, but her schedule did not permit her to attend a performance of *Voss*.) White would not allow himself to be part of any celebration at which the Queen and her 'Jolly Juke' would upstage his opera.

*Voss* was premiered in the Adelaide Festival Centre on 1 March 1986, the opening night of Anthony Steel's fifth and last Adelaide Festival. At the end of the *first* act, the audience stood and applauded. They sensed they had witnessed a defining moment in Australian cultural history, as Covell recorded in his review a few days later. 'Beyond all doubt,' he wrote,

*Voss* is an opera of lyrical idealism, intensely personal in its dramatic method, moving in its human relationships, transfiguring reality with music and words of unmistakable nobility.<sup>50</sup>

Roger Covell was an important link in the cast of creative personalities that eventually, after nearly a quarter-century, produced the opera *Voss*. He represented the connection between so many personalities in this venture: between Patrick White and Peter Sculthorpe, Richard Meale and David Malouf, Peter Hemmings and Anthony Steel, as well as the singers, the director, the conductor and the company and its audience. Covell's eloquent and prescient words written to accompany the recording of the work made in Sydney less than a year after its stage premiere in Adelaide thirty years later:

*Voss*, the opera, passed the first test of a new work of musical theatre. It engaged the complete attention of belief ... during the long months when the planning and preparation of its staging took place. Much more simply or directly than in White's novel, I believe, the central theme of the opera is the coming to terms of a people with a country. For The Australian Opera it also represents a discovery of idiom. For the first time its singers have been called on to make new characters, some of them archetypically Australian, accessible to the major operatic public within their own country. In the process, it seems, they may be playing their part in nurturing a creative partnership between librettist and composer of genuine and continuing significance.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> With Meale's permission, the author restored the seven pages of thinly outlined score (virtually a reprise of 'The Garden Scene') and this was performed at *The Voss Journey* in Canberra in May 2009.

<sup>50</sup> Roger Covell, 'Revamped *Voss* Brings Poetic Truths and Ideals,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 Mar. 1982, 45.

<sup>51</sup> Roger Covell, 'Voss: Transformation of a Legend in Richard Meale's *Voss*,' ABC, Sydney, 1987. Reissued on CD. Booklet 12–13.

When *Voss* was finally produced, there was a sigh of relief across the cultural landscape of this country. What Covell had called ‘the heavy burden of expectation’ had not only been lifted but had also been gratified. What is needed now, some thirty years after the opera’s premiere, is a new production.

**About the Author**

Vincent Plush is completing a PhD on ‘Music in the Life and Work of Patrick White’ at the University of Adelaide. Until 2013, he was Head of Research and Manager of National Cultural Programmes at the National Film and Sound Archive in Canberra. A composer, conductor, broadcaster, writer and teacher, he was previously based in the USA for nearly twenty years.