

COMPOSER INTERVIEW

A Brain that Keeps Working: An Interview with Helen Gifford

Jaslyn Robertson

Born in 1935, Helen Gifford is a pioneering Melbourne composer best known for her concert and theatre music. Her inspirations and interests are diverse, with a great love for French composers, Ancient Greek mythology and history, and Asian music. Early works include *Phantasma* for string orchestra (1963), submitted to the ISCM Festival at Copenhagen, and other works for large orchestra recorded by the ABC. Regularly commissioned by the Melbourne Theatre Company between 1970 and 1982, Gifford went on to independently conceive her own music theatre works, including *Regarding Faustus* (1983) and *Iphigenia in Exile* (1985). She received many other commissions throughout the 1980s and '90s, including *Point of Ignition*, written on a fellowship from the Australia Council in 1997, which has yet to be premiered by an orchestra.

Although only ten minutes in duration, *Music for the Adonia* (1993) is considered by many to be Gifford's most interesting work. Commissioned by Australia's leading contemporary music ensemble, ELISION, it reflects her theatrical sensibilities in the combination of evocative percussion writing, thick strums of the ten-string guitar, and guttural vocal sounds. The work

depicts Gifford's imagined music for the ancient Greek festival, the Adonia. One of many festivals celebrated by women alone, the Adonia took place annually in Athens. The women danced, sang, and ritually mourned the death of Adonis on their rooftops, planting and cultivating gardens in his honour.

What inspired you to write *Music for the Adonia*?

I discovered the Adonia festival that was noted for its music, and I thought I'd really like to write my own music for it. It's for women only to perform, but they don't forbid men to come near or anything.

This festival was fascinating to me, not knowing anything about the music. They did explain that there were very short flutes that sounded to me similar to a piccolo, but more throaty or raucous, like the xun – they made a bit of a noise. Then you have the lyra, the mandolin, and the cithara. These instruments corresponded to the three I chose. I have a ten-string guitar, which was a bit awesome when I came to the section of chords, big, long, broken chords. It's a quiet instrument, the guitar, and I think you need to put it front and centre. The harp's much louder, and I had a mandolin too, and that cuts through. But guitars, you don't hear them in a largish ensemble. There was a lot of percussion, and of course a vocalist. I didn't get a recording of the first performance, by Elision with Deborah Kaiser singing—only of the rehearsal—so I was very glad when Six Degrees Ensemble recorded it with Justine Anderson. They did it beautifully.

Was there much collaboration with Elision and Deborah Kaiser when you were writing the piece?

No. Elision travel, and especially then they were based overseas – Elision wouldn't have been able to keep going if they were always in Australia. So off they went! Their first performance was with a conductor they had brought back from Italy, and a mandolin player from Germany. I was just doing what I normally do. Just writing it, in the front room. No collaboration. I wouldn't know what to do about collaboration! For example, I often write piano pieces for Michael Kieran Harvey—he lives in Hobart—so there's no collaboration at all.

Is that your general process?

Yes, it is! It's a nerve-wracking time at the performance in every case. Well, no, not every case—Phoebe Green—I wrote a solo viola piece for her. She couldn't have been more cooperative, and that was lovely, so we're now great pals. She said 'now can we have another piece for viola and piano?' with her and Michael. She flew over to Hobart to rehearse with him. That was the last piece I wrote, *Ancestress*. The solo viola piece was *Desperation*.

Is there any relation between *Music for the Adonia* and *Iphigenia in Exile*?

David Young thought Iphigenia was a mouthful, so he called it *Exile*. He was good enough to put it online. That was written in '85, and *Adonia* in '93, so they were written a long time apart. They're very different, even though there's a solo woman.

And both are based on Greek mythology?

Yes, but based on actual fact. Take Iphigenia: they did have priestesses, and they did supervise or bless the poor person about to be sacrificed, but I don't think the priestess would ever have to do the sacrificing. That would become a bit messy, I think, with a woman.

Music for the Adonia is quite a short work. Are there a lot of commissions for short pieces?

There was a rule from the Australia Council. In all the years I had them assist me with one group or another, they always wanted works under ten minutes.

Were you disappointed that there weren't more opportunities for longer pieces?

Ah, well, that's when I set about writing my larger works. But I think it gives it an intensity. In *Music for the Adonia*, the ten minutes forces it on and on and on; there's no hanging about. For *Iphigenia*, I had a libretto written by Richard Meredith that was absolutely lovely, and I thought, I'm not going to try and compress this in any way. I will just set it as I want to. It was getting longer and longer, and I realised that it was going to be about an hour, but that suited everyone. Years later, about 2005, David Young looked me up and said: 'I've just been to the Australian Music Centre looking through Australian scores, and I came across this and was told it had never been performed.' So, that's when he planned to do a concert version. He also really wanted to do a staged production, but funding was getting disastrous for these arts companies and it just wasn't on!

Was it also because of funding that *Iphigenia* wasn't performed originally?

It was. I wrote it in '85, with generous assistance from the Australia Council, but no particular group had commissioned it. Richard Meredith got money from the theatre board, I got money from the music board, and there was money for someone else – was it to be a director or a conductor? Anyhow, that year was a bit of a disaster in many ways, even though I finished the work. My mother died, and one of my closest friends, Eleanor Barber, died. So it sort of got in the way of everything. It meant we had to find ways of putting it on ourselves. Well, you can't do it, we found! Barbara Sambell was going to sing the main role, and I thought we could get the ABC to record it – they were always very kind and supportive to me. We went in and recorded a fifteen-minute section, which was very effective, I thought. So, I had these reel-to-reel copies, but then years go too quickly, and no-ones playing reel-to-reel anything anymore. I've still got them in the house! But at least I was able to interest people in it. About three different groups said they were really interested in putting it on.

Chamber Made Opera was the group that ended doing it, in 2010. It used to be run by Douglas Horton, who put on quite extravagant productions. I think he saw the way that everything was going, and just didn't want to have his style cramped. He handed it over to David, who is very enterprising, and was working closely with Deborah Kaiser at the time. He saw this as a piece she would be able to sing, having also sung my *Music for the Adonia*. That was a highlight, and the actual concert recording had Brett Kelly conducting, which pleased me enormously, and all the musicians were handpicked: three clarinets, lots of percussion again, and also electronics. I had to rein it in again, thinking of future performances. Well of course it's never had another performance!

Another reason I thought that *Adonia* and *Iphigenia* might be related was the mandolin.

No, it's just that I like the mandolin. I decided that it was a very telling sound. But back in the '80s, no one played it! There was one person—Geoffrey Morris?—but for some reason he wasn't available, and we all started to lose interest a bit. But then David Young comes in and it's all go! And Deborah was marvellous, of course, but I still felt I'd let down Barbara Sambell, even though we had that fifteen-minute recording.

Can you tell me about how *Point of Ignition* came about a few years later?

Well, in 1990 I had a heart attack and four bypasses. My health had deteriorated noticeably in the '80s, both the asthma—everyone thought the asthma was causing me to lose weight, but it wasn't, it was the heart—and atherosclerosis. I had to try and recover from that, but then along comes Elision, wanting *Music for the Adonia*, and I said 'oh yeah I'll do it!' It was all a rush, and I thought, I'd like Elision to do a staged version, but because they were overseas all the time, I decided to write a large orchestral work with solo mezzo. Not much in the way of vocals, nothing like *Music for the Adonia*! So, I set about writing *Point of Ignition*. A very close friend of mine, Jessica Aldridge, is a poet – she's now 99. I've always run my works past her, because being a poet she's very articulate, and she loves to read the texts of everything. She helped me with a work I did for Astra, *Choral Scenes*.¹ It took me a couple of years to get together an anthology of poetry written by people who were combatants or participants in World War I. So, I wrote another hour-long piece. When left to my own devices, out it comes! But that took a lot out of me.

I finished *Point of Ignition* in 1997, and I took it along to the local orchestra administrator, who said 'leave it with me.' Well, I did. But the days of the ABC were over. Now it was a committee from the orchestra, who were putting on programs of music they liked. At its worst, I heard a couple of years ago that it had included a concert of AFL football songs, but mainly, as Paul Grabowsky memorably said, the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra was used as a backing group to faded pop music entertainers.

Do you think that orchestral programs are getting worse?

Well, I realised that the MSO was the wrong group for *Point of Ignition*. It's a setting of a poem with six verses of Jessica's, there is spoken voice and sung voice, and it's just under twenty minutes. This is not what they were wanting to program at the MSO. I can understand that—Jessica's poems can be a bit abstract, I find them divine—but a couple of years went by and someone said 'you've got to try them again, they've changed a bit, they seem to be playing more Australian music – not pop, not jazz.' So, I went in again, and they said 'it'll have to be referred to the committee.' Again, I looked them up, they didn't contact me. You have to ring and say 'what happened?' Then, Markus Stenz came out—a conductor from Germany—and he was going to put on works by Brett Dean. So I thought, oh! I'll show the score to him! I rang up his secretary, and she wasn't answering, she never got back to me. But Jacinta Dennett has her own ideas. She says that ANAM will be ideal to put this work on. And I agree. Justine Anderson wants to do it, I'm thrilled to say. So, as soon as Jacinta finishes her PhD, we'll draw breath and think of how to go about it. In the meantime, I've been taken to a couple of their orchestral concerts, and Jacinta introduced me to a German conductor who will be the artistic director. He was such a nice man, so interested and civilised! He took the score away, scanned it and sent it to someone in Germany. Jacinta makes things happen. She and David Young, what would my life be without them?

¹ *Choral Scenes: The Western Front, WWI* (1999). Astra is a Melbourne-based chamber music society specialising in contemporary performance. See <http://astramusic.org.au>.

It's hard for me to imagine writing an orchestral piece because I've never been around orchestras that play interesting new works.

It's all in the imagination, though. I was never around orchestras, I never even went to the Bernard Heinze youth orchestra demonstrations, mainly because I didn't like Heinze very much. I'm not a goer really, I don't go to concerts or theatre. Those days are in the past. I used to go to theatre, I belonged to a film society in Melbourne in the '60s—I remember there was a four-hour Russian film—but you change. In a tick I'll be 84, so you have to pace yourself. Everything has slowed a bit because of that. But as long as the brain keeps going, and it seems to be going as well as ever. At a concert last December, Astra put on my piece *Ancestress* for viola and piano. Some people were saying it's the best piece I've ever written. Seriously! Whereas Joel Crotty says *Music for the Adonia* is. He wanted to go to the performance at the Melbourne Conservatorium, so he came with Jacinta and me, and he said 'it's still your best work.' But I think *Iphigenia in Exile* might well be.

Are you working on any new pieces at the moment?

Yes, there is one, but it's barely begun because I have a ritual or routine. I start by writing sections, or writing about the same sort of thing several times, and seeing where that leads.

Is it for a particular performer?

Yes, Michael Kieran Harvey. I owe him, because in *Ancestress* he was reduced to playing with one finger in certain spots. But he loved it! He said, 'this is a new direction'. As Phoebe wanted a big part, she was virtually the *Ancestress* figure. She had the meaty part, and he was very much the subdued accompaniment. But Michael had performed my piece *Shiva* in 2012, which took him five months to learn—people don't realise, they can't believe he does this, but he fingers it all laboriously, everything he learns—so his performance was just magic.

Do you think it's better to write for performers?

If you can, if you can pick them. This may well be my last piece—I've got to keep that in mind—but I can't hurry. There have been no commissions for some time now, because I can't guarantee any deadline. I am going slower, and that's alright. I enjoy going reasonably slowly. It's my style! But Michael knows nothing of this piece. He doesn't have any idea! But he didn't know about *Shiva* either, and he sprung a surprise of his own on me. Before he gave the Peggy Glanville-Hicks address in Melbourne, he told me 'you should really come hear it.' During the talk he stops, sits down, and plays *Shiva*! Oh, it was wonderful!

The score excerpt below, from Adonia, is published with permission of the composer. Grateful thanks is extended to the Australian Music Centre for providing a digital copy of score.

About the Author

Jaslyn Robertson is a Melbourne-based composer whose works explore alternate gazes in music, microtonal tuning systems and unusual instruments. Her music has been performed at the Bendigo International Festival of Exploratory Music, Tilde New Music Festival and Klangwerkstatt Festival für Neue Musik Berlin.

54

Fl: Jet Whistle - with random fingering for all the glissandi and no tongued notes

FL

Bass Drum Superball

Mand

ff #

(Superball effect)

mf

take plectrum

3

3

3

Fl rests: take picc

56

Bass Drum Superball

al niente

Sop

mp

ff

58

Bass Drum: take bass drum sticks

with both hands hitting as fast as possible

hit throat

hit chest

ossia* see below

AA - A - E - AE - EE - UE - U - EU - OA - O

back of throat, open delivery → "head" notes

Harp

près de la table

B# C#

4 p

fff presto possible

Mand

sul pont

fff presto possible

Git

sul pont

fff presto possible

vla

plectrum

senza sord

fff presto possible

vcl

plectrum

senza sord

fff presto possible

* ossia

Sop

hit chest

U - OA - O

→ "head" notes

58

picc

B^b Clarinet

Bass Drum

2 Spring Coils

Sop

Harp

Mand. plectrum

Gt. plectrum

Vla. plectrum

vcl. plectrum

60

5

8

CL rest 7 bar

stay at spring coils, take rubber headed mallet Φ
take one wire brush Ψ to small chinese cymbal

take heavy metal beaters

sfz

supplicando

mp $\#$ \leftarrow mf mp \leftarrow mf mf \leftarrow p

SAA TSI SAA BAA TSI
-BAA -O-S

5 5 3 3 3:2

trum

5 8

à la table

fff

put down plectrum

D^b C B E F G^b A^b
(in preparation for bar 66)

harp rests 6 bars

sul pont

fff

Mand rests 8 bars

sul pont

fff

put down plectrum

Gt rests 6 bars

sul pont

fff

put down plectrum

arco

at pitch

pp

sul pont

fff

put down plectrum

vcl rests 6 bars

65

TamTam: a soft stroke in the centre should ensure that the TamTam sound is free of the overtones that would conflict with the soprano notes. In case the TamTam still predominates after the soprano has entered, the instrument may be damped fractionally.

TamTam al centro *p* (rit) perc. rests 6 bars (re-enters bar 72)

11 8

Sop *liberamente espressivo* *p* *(mp)* *(mf)* *f* *(mp)* Sop rests 3 bars

A DO NIN a niente

66 ♩ = 52 regolare

69

pic rests 3 bars

cl: in bar 67 the note sung (written E sounding D) while playing the "chord" gives a buzz tone, or an effect of flatterzunge.

Jaw vib

cl rests 3 bars

4 4

The roll of the chords is not too spread

pos ord

Harp *mf* roll chords, sempre

Mand *mp* *mf* *f* *ff* *mf* *p* *mf* *p*

sul tasto D string

sul pont

Gt *mf* roll chords, sempre

via *arco (senza sord)* *sul tasto* *vib* *con sord*

vcl *p* *f* *con sord*

(69)

Sop
mp
HIE HIE HIE HIE
mf
HA.H.H.H.H.H.H.HEE HA.H.H.H.H.H.H.HEE HA.H.H.H.H.H.H.HEE

Harp
(mf)

Mand
poco sul pont

Gt
(mf)

vla
pizz
5 7 9
mp (mf) ff

vcl
pizz
7 9 11
mp (mf) ff

con Sord
Sempre

con Sord
Sempre
pos ord

(70)

Sop

Harp
(mf)

Mand
sul tasto
pp mp (p) pp (p) mp pp
(dynamic [rhythm] indication only)
sul pont

Gt
(mf)

vla
arco
7 3 3 3
mp (mf) P
sul pont pos ord

vcl
arco
7 3
mp (mf) f
pos ord flautando sul pont pos ord
P (mp) mf mp mf P

71

72

Picc

B♭Clar

Perc go Tom Toms 3, 4 & 5 (mid-low pitch) take drumsticks ||

Sop *rubato (sop only)*
dolcissimo mp SU MEN SI LIE AE KE LO T *mf* *ff*

Harp D# G4

Mand *sul tasto* *p* *mf* *pos ord* *sul pont* *ff*

Gt

Vla *vib* *sul tasto* *p* *mf* *pos ord* *sul pont* *ff*

vcl *ord* *7:2* *ruvido* *mf* *mf* *sul pont* *sul pont* *molto sul pont* *ff*