

COMPOSER INTERVIEW

A Collage of Remembrance: An Interview with Paul Stanhope

Philip Eames

Paul Stanhope (b. 1969) is a Sydney-based composer, curator and conductor. After studying composition with Andrew Ford, Andrew Schultz and Peter Sculthorpe, Stanhope made his mark on the international stage by winning the 2004 Toru Takemitsu Composition Award with *Fantasia on a Theme by Vaughan Williams* (2003). Since then, his music has been programmed regularly by leading Australian ensembles such as the Australian Chamber Orchestra, Musica Viva, and the Australian String Quartet. Stanhope is currently Associate Professor in composition at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, as well as Artistic Chair of the Australia Ensemble at UNSW.

Stanhope has been the recipient of numerous APRA AMCOS Art Music Awards: in 2011, for his choral work *Deserts of Exile* and his String Quartet No. 2, and in 2018 for his Concerto for Trombone and Orchestra. He was again declared the winner of the choral category in 2020 for his major work *I am Martuwarra* (2019), scored for multiple choirs, piano and percussion. In 2014, Stanhope collaborated with the SSO, the Gondwana Choirs, and members of the Bunuba community from North Western Australia on the dramatic cantata *Jandamarra: Sing for the Country*. He has also worked extensively with the Sydney Chamber Choir, for whom he

served as musical director from 2006 to 2015. In 2017, the same ensemble released *Lux Aeterna*, a selection of Stanhope's choral works on the ABC Classics label.

Stanhope will make another substantial contribution to the Australian choral repertoire in 2020. His Requiem for chamber choir, tenor and soprano soloists and small instrumental ensemble is presently awaiting its premiere by the Sydney Chamber Choir under the direction of the composer.

Your Requiem, the new 'major work' commissioned by the Russell Mills Foundation, is a significant work in the final stages of completion. How did it come about?

Russell Mills was a big fan of the Sydney Chamber Choir, and he very unfortunately died a few years ago. He was a senior healthcare manager at Westmead hospital, and his passions included visual arts and music. Russell's connection to the choir was through his association with Richard Gill, who took over as Music Director after me in 2015. After hearing Sydney Chamber Choir's performance of *Carmina Burana* in 2016, Russell donated money for future performance projects, as well as a commission of a major new work. The Requiem is dedicated to Russell as a contemplation of his passion for artistic endeavours, and a commemoration of his life. Each movement is dedicated to a significant figure, with various movements commemorating other composers, such as Martin Wesley-Smith, as well as that great influence on many of our lives, Richard Gill. The *Sanctus* was dedicated to Richard.

Was there a particular reason you chose the *Sanctus* to represent Richard?

Yes, because it's a particularly stubborn movement, and it's got a bit of a Stravinskian flavour to it. By stubborn I really mean tenacious, persistent and headstrong, which were key ingredients in Richard's great success. I fondly remember singing in Sydney Chamber Choir when he conducted the Stravinsky Mass, and drawing so much out of that experience as a composer. Perhaps some of that has made it into the *Sanctus*.

What were the circumstances of the Requiem's creation?

I had been thinking about the Requiem for a number of years. I'd already written two of the movements: the *Lux Aeterna* dates back to 1999, and the *Agnus Dei* to mid-2016. Both of these are memorial pieces, and I wrote the *Agnus Dei* to connect to the *Lux Aeterna*, thinking that this could be a small pocket of a larger piece. Then between 2018 and 2019 I wrote five new choral movements and tried to use threads from the existing two movements to form elements that would flow through the Requiem.

And what might those elements be?

The first of them is textual. In the *Agnus Dei* there is the use of the poem 'Do Not Stand at My Grave and Weep' by Mary Elizabeth Frye, the idea being that the Latin text interacts with an English poetic form. I found the two texts bounced off each other well, so I implemented that strategy in two other movements: firstly in the *Kyrie*, which uses the poem 'Mercy' by the Indian poet Neela Nath Das, who uses the imagery of rain bringing down mercy upon us. Given Australia was in a terrible drought at the time, this seemed like a timely image, but it goes

beyond that as well: it's talking about spiritual replenishment. Secondly, the last movement, *In Paradisum*, uses a very famous text by Emily Dickinson, 'Hope Is The Thing With Feathers,' which seeks to draw out themes of moving beyond commemoration and onto life renewing.

How do you manage the clarity when simultaneously setting texts in Latin and English, especially when the overlapping of texts is a frequent textural feature?

As you listen to a piece with dual texts, you immediately understand the English clearly enough, but you don't necessarily comprehend the Latin. That automatically brings out a foreground and background. But I tried to give windows for both languages and worked very carefully on the counterpoint. For instance, there may be a sustained chord on a particular Latin syllable, while a soloist sings over the top. There's sometimes a bit of overlapping, but the audience has the ability to read the text in the program, and contemplate the 'bouncing off' effect between the two texts.

With something like the *Agnus Dei* there's a very small amount of Latin text anyway, so it's just little epithets repeated over and over. They become in some ways more like instrumental lines, just accompanying the delivery of a solo text. However, there is the opportunity of bringing the Latin forward in the texture at times, particularly in the climax of the piece.

The Requiem appears to play with the idea of juxtaposition in a lot of ways, with the Latin vs English, old vs new, and sacred vs secular. What was your inspiration here?

Yes, that's right. I looked at a large range of texts and found poetry that was either the best embellishments of the Latin texts, or the best antidotes. The other text divide is that all the English texts are by female poets, which wasn't a deliberate decision; I arrived there subconsciously. The requiem form, amorphous as it is, really does come out of the patriarchal system of the Catholic Church and its liturgy, so I left out the whole sequence, the *Dies Irae* and so on, to dilute that somewhat. In the end, the Latin church texts are still associated with that patriarchal and, in some ways, dictatorial institution, especially if you know any of the church history—it's pretty terrible at times. So, the question is: how do we approach that in this day and age? How do we cope with the history of oppression? I guess my idea was to try and find antidotes to balance the associations of those texts.

What other elements connect the movements?

There's another thread I integrated into the Requiem: three songs from a previous cycle called *Songs for the Shadowland*. The Requiem could be performed with or without that song cycle, but as the Requiem has a soprano and tenor soloist, these songs give the soloists an aria each and a duo. This really enriches the textural palette overall, and provides a feeling of the more personal. The choice of the four wind instruments in the Requiem also goes back to *Songs for the Shadowland*, written for oboe, clarinet, horn, bassoon and piano. In rewriting the orchestration in the *Songs* I've been able to incorporate harp and vibraphone, which I think actually works really well as a substitute for the piano and adds something new.

Another element that connects the movements is the interweaving of poetry by the Indigenous poet Oodgeroo Noonuccal. Noonuccal's observations around mourning and death

are profound, and they also add an insight into the notion of Indigenous mourning rituals to the fabric of the piece. To me, this seems to ask the question, 'how do we die well on country?' I think Noonuccal's insights significantly enhance the pre-existing commemorative messages and European threads throughout the rest of the Requiem.

The Songs for the Shadowland were composed in 1999, the same year as the *Lux Aeterna*. This implies that the Requiem comprises two major compositional periods spaced twenty years apart.

Yes, the whole piece spreads out over twenty-one years. I don't in any way compare myself to J.S. Bach, but I do know that Bach repurposed arias from his myriad cantatas here and there for his great Passion settings. It's a bit like that, finding some of the best bits of what you've done and asking, 'How can I package this up into a new form?' That then provides new contexts for the existing material and gives you a basis to weave around those elements.

I noticed in the *Lux Aeterna* you also seemed to play around with the text a little more in terms of word order.

Yes, I think that's right. The movement does cover the text completely—it's only a very small text anyway—but the order of the original Latin phrases is pulled around somewhat, so as to contemplate each of the images. I find the images quite striking in that text.

You have a strong relationship with the Sydney Chamber Choir as both a composer and director. As such you would be very familiar with the voices and the way they blend. How did that affect your writing for the new Requiem movements?

Standing up in front of a choir week in and out, you learn the instrument really well—you come to know the different colours of soloists that you can bring out. Although I finished my time with them in 2015, over the next three years I put together a CD recording with them, so I continued to work with the choir quite closely. From listening to them back in the studio over and over, I feel like I still have their voices in my head. Perhaps I need a doctor for that... Anyway, it's extremely comforting to know an instrument so well that you're able to think, 'Oh yes, that texture is going to sound great with them all'; or when I try to avoid something because it isn't the strength of the group.

How would you describe your approach to choral writing more technically; is there a deliberate way you go about approaching sonorities or voice leading?

I think I often use a pyramid structure in chords, so that there are larger intervals at the bottom and smaller intervals at the top. It's a pretty tried and true method, but it's also interesting to find ways to disturb that. When you can strip the choir back to say, two or three vocal sections, or a small group of soloists from the larger group, you have more of an opportunity to explore different colours out of that pyramid structure, so you don't necessarily need the tenors and basses to be spread so far apart.

I like mucking around with tonal chords and false relations, so you set up tonal chords that then bleed out of that tonality and into another one, creating crunches that in a voice leading

sense are intuitive to the singer. It works the opposite way as well—sometimes crunchy chords resolve to bright tonalities. Suddenly, overtones start snapping together and you get loud chords. If you want a loud chord, you need to run them in certain parts of the voice, and the partials need to ring together, otherwise they don't work. They need aspects of consonance to actually work, but there are ways of mucking around with that consonance to add depth and to experiment with texture. I guess that extends to a third element, textural writing, where you have extended techniques, and I use those to colour a choral sound rather than having them as the main feature.

I noticed there were also some quartertones in the instrumental parts of the Requiem?

Yes, that's a more recent experimentation for me. It has to do with the idea of the overtone series, and with choirs being built on overtones. I don't think that choirs are necessarily the best vehicles to experiment with quartertones—tuning is such a wilderness in any case! I mean, there are some soloists out there who are able to work their magic around this sort of thing, but if you've got an oboe, then there are all of these quartertone possibilities. So, the idea was to use a little bit at the beginning and the end of the work, to mark out some bookends and make it clear that music is built on these foundations of an overtone series.

Have there been any other formative influences on your choral writing?

Yes, I think that Benjamin Britten's music sets the template for a lot of choral music that happened after 1945. His text setting is just so clear, and his musical word painting is absolutely brilliant. I like to indulge in a bit of word painting as well. But there are also new influences in there. I tip my hat to Stephen Leek, for example, for the textural experimentation that he's done over the years. I guess my music tends to leapfrog between elements of that school of Australian composition, the English school, and elements of Scandinavian and Baltic choral music—something that really interests me. There's a lot of fantastic music being written in this region—all outside of the dominant European context. I guess that's what makes the music so interesting to me. I also visited Denmark, Norway and Finland in 2004, which was a great experience—hearing the richness of choral music that permeates many levels of society, including singing at the pub!

Although Requiems are frequently performed in the concert hall, do you see yours being used in a sacred context—as an actual Requiem mass?

It would be possible to perform it in a mass setting, but it would need to be a pretty adventurous church to do so! It's really conceived as a concert work and an artistic product, rather than a liturgical one. I mean, Requiems have been invented and reinvented so many times, and each composer can choose how they want to set the text. When Brahms came along, though, he completely rewrote the whole idea of the Requiem, with poetic texts in German and no Latin movements. Then Britten used war poetry in his Requiem, so as to add a new layer of meaning to the medium. Another model for me was a more recent Requiem by Gabriel Jackson, which introduces a real diversity of English texts alongside liturgical texts. Ultimately, it's up to the composer how they want to repackage this product and turn it into a piece with the message that they, as artists, want to give out.

Although it was intended for a 2020 premiere, due to the COVID-19 pandemic the concert unfortunately had to be postponed. Is the plan still for you to conduct the Requiem in Sydney during 2021?

At the moment, the Requiem is programmed for performance by Sydney Chamber Choir in March 2021. Given the COVID-safe measures and rapid changes to restrictions, it's always possible that this may be delayed again. Fingers crossed it will go ahead some time in 2021!

About the Author

Philip Eames is an Australian composer, pianist, choral director and musicologist. His doctorate, conferred in 2017, was on the adventurous choral music of Percy Grainger and was undertaken at the Sydney Conservatorium, where Philip is currently a sessional lecturer and research assistant.