

# GOING INTO SHADOWS

An opera by Andrew Schultz with a libretto by Julianne Schultz

## THE MAKING OF AN OPERA: ARTICLES AND ANALYSIS

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# Evolution and Travel

The music of Andrew Schultz

Tracking down Andrew Schultz for an interview can be a trans-global affair – as I discovered not long ago when writing a profile on him for Australia's *24 Hours* music magazine. I first made contact with the composer when he was in Australia attending some performances of his music. Shortly afterwards he was in America on business. I made further contact with him when he arrived home in London. That was the week before he went down to the south of France.

We finally found time to speak after he returned to his official position as Head of Music Studies and Composition at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama in London, but my preferred time of interview wasn't possible. That weekend he was in Lucerne, Switzerland.

Not surprisingly, there is an element of the traveller in the music which Andrew Schultz composes. 'Perhaps the Australian condition is one of eternal tourism,' the Brisbane-educated Schultz says in the programme note to his orchestral score *The Devil's Music*. 'When do we arrive?' he asks rhetorically.

Schultz himself likes music which embraces a sense of journey. 'I've composed pieces influenced by Asian music,' he says from his London home, 'and I like Asian music's colouristic and rhythmic languages and the modal quality of it, but the harmonic question is not really resolved in some of that music. It's all about arrival, but what do you do when you reach that point of arrival?'

For the 40-year-old Schultz, it's not the arrival that counts but the journey. That's why he's so attracted to large-scale orchestral forms. Works such as *The Devil's Music*, *Diver's Lament*, *Southern Ocean* and *In Tempore Stellarum*, *Symphony No. 1* are painted on large-scale orchestral canvasses. The *Symphony* in fact uses voices as well, an area of Western music which Schultz wishes to explore further. 'There's a distinct sense of progression and journey in Western music,' he says. 'There's a sense of architecture – large-scale structural events occur which have resonances later.'

But these traveller's impressions

## Martin Buzacott

*The photographs accompanying this article are by Michael Bianchino, and are taken from the film by Kevin Lucas of Black River, featuring the Aboriginal mezzo-soprano Maroochy Barambah as Miriam.*





work at the microcosmic level too, with individual details within the music which resonate within anyone who has ever been away from home. In *The Devil's Music*, commissioned by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra in 1992, for instance, we hear distant sirens and the sound of engines, there are bell-like noises conveyed as if on the wind, and vague reminiscences of hymns. In the more recent *In Tempore Stellae*, the opening features the sound of an airport or train station arrival board clattering into a new configuration.

It's music inspired by the technological age, but retaining its humanist base. 'I'm interested in cultural collision,' Schultz says. 'I call them irreconcilable synchronicities where two things happen at once and you observe them to do so, but they have no real connection with each other. I'm not interested in them as John Cage might be. As a humanist composer I see it more from the perspective of the individual observing things, contradictory things, and making sense of them.'

Like a true traveller, Schultz likes to make sense of passing things and his compositional career has proceeded concurrently with a number of senior academic appointments, some of which he gained at a precociously young age. Yet he is at pains to stress that he is not an 'academic' composer. 'Maybe there's an expectation that because I work in a tertiary institution, then I'll write music of a certain style,' he says. 'But in reality my music is very direct. It feels natural for me to find out how and why things work in musical terms. Then I apply that to

my own work. So I see the academic side of my work supporting the creative one.'

Travel and the contemplation of the bigger intellectual picture were instilled in Andrew Schultz from an early age. The son of a Protestant minister father and a psychologist mother, Schultz was born in Adelaide but moved frequently around Australia. As a schoolboy he spent time in western New South Wales, western Victoria, and then wound up in Brisbane where he completed his secondary and university education. Eventually he would complete a PhD at the University of Queensland in 1987, and the now Dr Schultz would go on to a distinguished academic career in Australia (at the University of Wollongong), America and the United Kingdom.

But throughout the endless lectures and administration that modern university life demand, Schultz has continued to write music for Australia's leading ensembles. Some works such as the opera *Black River* (1988), set to a libretto by his sister Julianne Schultz, have broken through to reach a mainstream audience. Others, like the vocal sextet *Ekstasis* (1990) and the various orchestral pieces from the 1990s, have established Schultz as a composer whose works explore serious and imaginative sound-worlds while taking their audience with them.

He's been in London for nearly four years now, running the Guildhall's Music Studies and Composition programmes but he returns regularly to Australia. He's kept a connection with the University of Wollongong, where he taught for many years, and he returns to Australia at least twice annually. 'It was

never a case of me simply packing up and leaving Australia,' he says. 'It was just my career moving on.'

Over recent years he has completed a few smaller commissions, including a new work for Brisbane's Griffith Piano Trio, but the bulk of his compositional energies have been directed toward *Going into Shadows*, his largest operatic project to date.

Significantly, however, he has continued to travel while working on the opera. 'Travel opens up your horizons, but it also makes you critical of what you see and less content to be satisfied with things that you don't think are as good as they could be,' he says. It also has ramifications for a composer's musical style. 'Growing up in Australia and then travelling, one has to forge one's own musical style consciously to some extent. You have to be open-minded to different things, and that experience has formed my specific musical interests in harmonic colour, orchestration and structure.'

But as one would expect from a composer whose interests embrace such large-scale forms, Andrew Schultz is not so much interested in musical architecture *per se* as he is with the themes that can sustain massive operatic, choral and orchestral structures. There are few Australian composers of his generation whose music returns so obsessively to the big themes. His major works contemplate the very nature of life and death. He is as interested in spiritual themes as he is in the Devil and hardly a major work goes by without some reference to sex and also the ocean – or at its broader level, water.

While adding the aforementioned sense of cultural collision to the list, Schultz himself happily acknowledges the recurrent themes. 'You can actually reduce those themes even more,' he says with genuine and yet strangely dispassionate interest, almost as if he were analysing the work of someone else. 'If music can be about anything, I see it as a human experience in some way. You can say, for instance, that sex and water are pretty much the same thing in the Freudian sense. There's also the sense of oblivion that comes from being submerged in water, and a sense of timelessness and weightlessness which can be equated with death.'

And so Schultz's larger pieces play out these conflicts between the great mystical themes. In *In Tempore Stellae*, which bears the subtitle *Symphony No. 1*, the first of the three movements draws its texts variously from the *Book of Job*, Ovid's account of Creation in the *Metamorphoses*, and also from Charles Messier's numbered list of nebulous and celestial objects published in 1771. Commissioned by the Melbourne Chorale and performed by them accompanied by the Melbourne Symphony in 1998, it represents something of a breakthrough work for the composer. 'I'd like to continue the things I did in *In Tempore Stellae* – in other words, to write another large orchestral work with voices,' Schultz says. 'I

think there's a whole medium or genre in which text and voice are integrated with orchestral sonorities. I can imagine writing a series of works which start from those ideas. There's something in the harmonic structure and the scale of the piece which allowed me to speak in the way I wanted to.'

Because of the importance of the text in his recent works, Schultz aligns this proposed series of vocal works with opera, a medium in which he has achieved conspicuous success. For him, opera as a modern art-form has been challenged by the pre-eminence of the cinema, a form in which audiences are absorbed by the medium itself. 'Modern cinema is almost like Wagner's description of what opera should be,' he says. 'It hits you from every possible angle.'

For Schultz, opera has become so class-ridden that it has tended to lose its impact as a social force. It has become too much about itself, too preoccupied with its own traditions, and is consequently too devoid of immediacy for his liking. His own opera *Black River* (1988), however, sought to address this issue of opera's relevance in the modern age. Centred on the issue of aboriginal deaths in custody, the opera came as a jolt to white audiences still basking in the warm glow of Australia's Bicentennial celebrations. 'The reason for writing *Black River* was to create an opera which was absolutely current and powerful, and rather bruising in some ways,' Schultz says quietly. 'It wasn't "nice" but instead was a direct piece located culturally within its Australian context.'

'Nice' or 'not nice', *Black River's* tough topic and its eschewal of the traditional operatic gestures certainly made an impact. Premiered in 1989 by the Sydney Metropolitan Opera and the Seymour Group, it won a National Critics' Award in that year and has been given subsequent productions in 1990 and 1997. A film version has won international awards and been screened at many festivals. 'It's a piece which communicated very clearly what I wanted to say,' its composer says. It's one of the pieces in which Schultz feels he came closest to expressing himself most accurately. Another was the vocal work *Ekstasis* and a similar thing happened in *Diver's Lament*, an orchestral work which he composed for the Sydney Symphony Orchestra in 1996. 'I set out to use a harmonic language in a very specific and controlled way in that piece, and I think it worked,' he says.

But opera remains his great love and *Going Into Shadows* has occupied him off and on in the ten years since he first planned a follow-up to *Black River*. 'There was a kind of euphoria after *Black River* and Julianne and I thought that on our next project together we would do just what we wanted to do. Reality caught up with us on that! We went through a process of discussion with various producers including John Wregg from Sydney Metropolitan Opera and Paul Thompson who was at that point the



Dramaturg of the Sydney Theatre Company. We worked with them, getting their advice and input.'

Large-scale contemporary operas, however, do not find many performance opportunities and it was only the intervention of the Guildhall which made the completion of *Going Into Shadows* possible. The further support of Simone de Haan from the Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University meant that the massive two-and-a-half-hour project has become, rather like Schultz himself, a trans-global commodity. And with such powerful institutional backing, the composer has been able to extend the ideas of operatic form that had first been established in *Black River*. In particular, he's interested in the challenge of creating variety in the large-scale forms, and in continually re-engaging the audience's attention.

'After *Black River* Julianne and I didn't want to stay in the same territory,' he says. 'We didn't want a repetition of that genre. The idea in *Going Into Shadows* has been to try and invent something that is on many levels quite entertaining as well as carrying deeper meanings. We are creating situations from which the music can spring naturally. There's quite a lot of on-stage music, for instance, and there's music in various parts of the auditorium. We're experimenting with that.'

And whereas *Black River* was linear in its narrative structure, the larger scale of *Going Into Shadows*

demands a rather more complex structure. 'In Act 1 there's a romance that's unfolding in a kind of happy and "normal" way, but we use an episodic structure to show various stages of the relationship,' he says. 'But the ordinary sequence of events is interrupted by very short orchestral miniatures which show that there's something else happening in the story. By Act 2 the structure is much more through-composed and continuous. Act 3, likewise, represents a kind of acceleration. Things become slightly out of control in the lives of characters.'

The use of film and video effects is a feature of the opera, as is a recurrent, brooding harmonic motif which has typified many of Schultz's works since *Ekstasis*. There are also those typically Schultzian atmospheric sounds, including a kind of low rumbling that keeps emerging throughout the opera.

Working on a such a massive project has changed him as a composer. 'You don't know when you start something quite what it will turn into,' he says. 'It's a relief to be finished with it because for the first time in a long while I'm facing a blank page again. In a sense you can't move on creatively while you're tied up with a big piece – it needs to create its own context. My work is much less dark now than when I started the opera. I've been through a kind of evolution.'

And for a creative artist, evolution is the ultimate form of travel.